



DIOGENES OF MAYBERRY

MANIFEST INSANITY

Or: How I Learned
to Stop Worrying and
Think for Myself

MANIFEST INSANITY
OR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND THINK FOR MYSELF

By: Diogenes of Mayberry

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Electronic Edition

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Dedicated to Christopher Hitchens, 1949-2011

Reality is infinitely more entertaining than fiction . . .

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Acknowledgments

This book is for all of you that want to bang your head and scream with impotent frustration at the insanity that pervades this world and feel the need for some comic relief. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the role *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* played over the years in humorously bringing to my attention the absurd events of everyday life which left fans like myself stunned at just how frustrating people can be; especially the *Back in Black* segments. I felt an instant kindred connection with Lewis Black, given that I too have a tendency to rant—to the eternal dismay of friends forced to listen to my endless bitching—about the stupid crap that drives us both nuts. I suspect I am not alone and that there is a communal frustration which lies at the heart of the comedic appeal of Lewis Black.

Thanks to my friends Ian, Ajmal, Marilyn, Keith and Denise, and the spiritual advisers from different faiths that helped me with ideas, input, book recommendations, background information, and proof-reading. Thanks to my friend Faith and her husband Major Dan of the U.S. Air Force for the military input. Any inconsistencies with regards to normal flight operations are due to literary license on my part. Thanks to my friend Nancy who encouraged me to write this book after I told her the concept; and to Richard for generously allowing me to sit by the babbling brook at his country home for some peace and quiet during the writing and editing process. Also, to my smartphone, with which I wrote significant portions of dialogue or noted key ideas while walking down the street, riding the subway, or lying in bed pondering at three in the morning. Finally, thanks to my graphic artist, ImageTrance, for the cover art.

I must also pay homage to the other comedians who have inspired and shaped my sense of humor over the years:

George Carlin and his take on the Ten Commandments:

. . . Thou shalt always be honest and faithful to the provider of thy nookie.

. . . Thou shalt try real hard not to kill anyone, unless of course, they pray to a different invisible man from the one you pray to.

. . . Thou shalt keep thy religion to thyself.

Bill Maher for *Religulous* and for always being honest enough to call it as he sees it.

Lewis Black on fundamentalist Christians and the Creation Museum: "These people are watching *The Flintstones* as if it were a documentary."

Penn & Teller and their terrific, though sadly no longer in production, show *Bullshit!*, in which the episode "The Vatican" brought to my attention the papal encyclical of *Casti Connubii*, referenced later in this book.

Dennis Miller: "Now, I don't want to get off on a rant here, but . . ."

My long-time favorite, Robin Williams: "The Puritans—our ancestors—people so uptight the English kicked them out."

Finally, I would like to thank the brilliant scholars for their life-long academic efforts which provided the majority of the background research used in this book.

Israel Finkelstein & Neil Silberman: *The Bible Unearthed* is an enlightening and eye-opening book which should be required reading in every theology and ancient history class. While doing my research, I came across several references to this piece of brilliant historical detective work, which ultimately formed the basis for my Old Testament chapter.

John J. Collins: *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* gives a very insightful, step-by-step, and easy to read summary of each biblical book and its historical background, context, and meaning. A must-read for anyone that actually wants to know what they are talking about when spouting off about the meanings of the passages in the "Christian Old Testament."

T.J. Wray & Gregory Mobley: *The Birth of Satan* is a journey—with touches of subtle wit—through the tangled history of the biblical portrayal of the dark one and how many aspects of demonic imagery in popular culture were borrowed from the surrounding lore of other ancient cultures. It is a short and easy read, and a book I would strongly urge everyone to read for understanding the complete and total misrepresentation of Satan, hell, and the needless psychological baggage these ideas have inflicted upon billions of people over the past two millennia.

Bart Ehrman: *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, and *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* are both extremely insightful works, full of interesting historical background and written with equal parts humor and candor.

Geza Vermes: *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus* is the New Testament equivalent to Collins' book, with detailed deconstructions and critical analysis of several key passages.

Karen Armstrong: *A History of God*, and *The Battle for God* both of which give an informative overview of the three major monotheistic religions; the former on their origins and theological evolution, and a focus on the rise of fundamentalism in the latter.

Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers: *The Power of Myth* is an enduring classic. With his encyclopedic knowledge of world mythology, Campbell revealed the links shared by many cultural mythologies. He also discussed how the male warrior god of a group of desert herders came to eliminate the idea of a nurturing mother-goddess common in agricultural societies, impacting the last two thousand five hundred years of Western culture.

Thanks also to my local public library for providing many of the books I required for my research; and to the producers of the many superb television documentaries that provided endless hours of fascinating insights.

Obviously, I have provided only a very simple overview of some of the historical facts cited in this book and I have intentionally not delved deeper into the issues for the sake of brevity. Nor am I an academic expert in biblical archaeology, textual criticism, or history, but I have tried to string together a coherent summary based on works by several different scholars. After all, this is a polemical work, not a history text. If you want to learn more about the history mentioned, read some of the books that are dedicated to the specific topic of interest. I suggest you start with the ones listed above and others throughout this book, as I found them all to be highly informative. I recommend reading in the order I have listed them. This will allow you to gather a better chronological understanding of the dogmas and doctrines that had evolved by the time of Jesus in first-century Palestine and beyond, especially as Christianity evolved under the influence of Paul, and was then ultimately misrepresented by later Church authorities who shifted the basis of its theology.

Foreword

The inspiration for this book was derived from both fact and fiction. For example, the evolution hearings sparked by numerous state and local boards of education, and of course elements of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* lend themselves nicely to themes I explore. Obviously, *Doctor Strangelove* is a major influence and I highly recommend watching this movie first if you have never seen it. This will give the reader a sense of the irony and satire in this parody of the cold war mentality, which I appropriate and reimagine for the right-wing paranoia of modern times.

Some may accuse me of not being original and borrowing elements from so many other sources, rather than creating my own literary devices. However, I made a conscious choice to use these popular culture references due to their familiarity, as I felt I could achieve a greater impact telling my story with them than without them. As you read through this book you will discover how so many biblical stories were borrowed from surrounding cultures and even from earlier passages in the Bible, so why shouldn't I employ the same strategy? After all, if it was an acceptable practice for the biblical authors to copy so much from others, then why shouldn't I do the same? Further, if you can believe that Moses parted the Red Sea and Jesus rose from the dead, then it should not be too hard to stretch your imaginations to include my teenage protagonist having all the answers at his fingertips, especially as the Bible is about accepting the implausible.

It is said one should never discuss religion and politics in polite company, but what the hell, I jumped right in with both feet. When I started writing this book I thought I knew a fair bit about religion and history, but I soon realized the view of history I had been taught—and that of the majority of the lay public, as well—had been influenced by many false premises which are generally accepted as historical facts. For example, I had previously accepted at face value the mythical incarnation known as the united monarchy of David and Solomon, and the subsequent vanishing of the ten northern tribes of Israel. As Professor Finkelstein explained with his archaeological research, these stories were merely propagandized legends that were appropriated and absorbed into the cultural history of Judea, which then subsequently passed into Western history as facts.

The more I researched, the more I found I was only just beginning to scratch the surface. When it came to realizing just how narrow my understanding was of previously stored bits of historical trivia, I was reminded of the admission by Socrates: "I know nothing but the fact of my own ignorance." A few years ago, I came across the Latin phrase *ex scientia vera*, which translates to: from knowledge, truth. I was inspired by this principle, decided to adopt it as my personal motto, and I have tried to live up to this ideal in many aspects of my life. It also became one of the motivations that drove my quest to spread the truth behind the religious beliefs cited in this book to a wider, public audience. The search became an awakening, an intellectual journey, a historical adventure, and a learning experience for me; I hope it will be to others.

This book didn't start off with so much background information, nor was it originally intended to be such a quirky trip through history. But, the more I researched and wrote, the more the storyline evolved over time as I uncovered more references to the true origins of religious beliefs that have come down through time. I hope it did not become a long-winded rant, as I have tried to make it interesting, entertaining, and informative. I am aware that at times the protagonist does prattle on, and it was suggested that I put in more interaction between the teachers and students to break up these passages; but, I consciously chose not to do this, as I feared doing so would interrupt the flow and continuity of the dialogue, thus making the book even longer. Though, admittedly, at the same time, it is also a harsh critique of the intolerance of fundamentalism and the doctrine of inerrancy that evangelicals have imposed upon religious mythology.

I have made an effort to double- and sometimes triple-check the information I came across, but sometimes I was unable to find a corroborating source and so I had to rely on the single resource available to me at the time. For example, I reconstructed the Huxley quote from various sources, all having slight differences, to formulate a reasonable approximation that attempts to capture the essence of what he said, given the original was never properly recorded. Additionally, I have copied the quotes verbatim, maintaining the spelling, case, and punctuation as derived from the original sources; sources cited and referenced following the terms of Fair Use. If errors have crept in, or someone has cited false information or quotations which I inadvertently repeat, I would be pleased to be shown the truth and vow to make amends as necessary. See notes on the second edition, below. After all, that is what this book is all about and it would be hypocritical of me to ignore or deny the existence of the facts in light of new evidence.

And no, I don't mean 'the way, the truth, and the life' of Jesus Christ your Lord and savior, as I must obviously be a lost soul foundering in the dark and in need of the illumination of Christian truth. I mean real,

hard, documented evidence of tangible and historical, archaeological, or other legitimate scholarly disciplines—not videos of Kirk Cameron showing me how a banana evolved to fit the human hand. Or was it the human hand that evolved to hold a banana?

Should I be lucky enough to have this book published in print, and even more so if people actually buy it, then I await the inevitable backlash that is sure to come from the devout faithful who will prove my points about the dangers of religious intolerance combined with ignorance and blind faith. I am sure the subjects of this work will: 1) condemn it, without first having even bothered to read it or look up a single independent source to confirm the accuracy of a point they find particularly inconvenient to their beliefs; 2) ban it from their homes and schools, lest a wayward idea actually implant itself and spark independent reasoning as a challenge to their ideological thought control; and 3) burn it (I would like to thank you for buying a copy first), as what better way is there for them to deal with heretics like myself and to so thoroughly demonstrate their fanaticism. Or is fascism a better word?

Those with vested interests in maintaining the religious status quo, trying desperately to justify their beliefs, will surely criticize and tell me I'm wrong by using tautological arguments, including that old standard, 'because the Bible says so.' To them, I would preemptively say your arguments are bound to be constrained by dogma, and therefore, likely to be entirely one-sided, self-serving, and without substance or merit. Rest assured, I harbor no illusions that I will convert, or even sway, devout Christians. That is neither my objective, nor a reality that is likely to ensue. However, just maybe, some more open-minded readers might learn a little something about the history of their religion and its doctrines.

The other argument I commonly come across from the faithful is that people like me, with no faith, attack religion because they don't understand it. On the contrary, a large number of agnostics and atheists were, at one time, churchgoers and know very well the religious experience. So, to those who would accuse me of not understanding religion, I tell them now that this hollow tactic will not stand up to reality. I attended church every Sunday for almost twenty years. I also spent grades eight and nine enrolled in a private, religious school where I had a born-again experience after being indoctrinated with daily Bible classes and taught spurious scientific claims about fossils on mountain tops being deposited in the flood.

Finally, after years of research, I have come to the conclusion that religion has inflicted tremendous damage on humankind throughout history. By allowing religion to have free rein over society for so long, through our own willing surrender and the deliberate subjugation of our intellect to the power of self-delusion, we humans have freely let our stupidity and superstitions hold us hostage from the beginning. Surely, we would have been better off had our primitive ancestors never thought up this divine twaddle in the first place. However, my convictions aside, sometimes I can't shake the feeling that capricious, unseen forces in the universe delight in screwing with us for their own twisted amusement.

My boots and shovel are ready; let the predictable counteroffensive begin.

[Notes on the Second Edition](#)

What I thought would only be two additions to existing sections at the start of this process, turned out to be a substantial update with upwards of fifty amendments, additions, and deletions, resulting in ten thousand words of new material and constituting a second edition.

Originally, my intent was to expand the New Testament section by providing further insight into the Jewish concepts of messianic belief, and how these ideas were misappropriated by the Gospel writers for their own agenda. I was aware of which passages Christians *claim* are messianic—indeed, many are mentioned in this book—but I was curious to learn which passages were considered messianic within Judaism originally. Having made considerable use of *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* for relevant content in my Old Testament section, I reached out to its author, John J. Collins, Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School, to ask for insights on passages which are legitimately considered messianic in a Jewish context. I would like to offer my abundant thanks to Professor Collins here. Not only did he take the time to engage with me in a number of email exchanges spanning a couple of years, providing detailed clarifications and insights, but he also generously sent me a digital copy of one of his books, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, which provided exquisite background on this topic. The detailed information in this book goes far beyond the initial glimmerings of messianism in early Second Temple Judaism and a handful of passages calling for the return of a Davidic heir, but how messianism evolved and diverged into four significantly different paradigms (warrior-king, priest, prophet, angelic) by the Hasmonean era. The historical context covered by Professor

Collins provided six pages and three thousand words of new content in my second edition, further illuminating the nature of messianism as it related to legends surrounding Jesus.

The second addition I had planned, was to update the section on the Gospel of John dealing with its authorship and how it markedly differs from John of Patmos and the book of Revelation. After reading Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, I had a deeper understanding of the Hellenistic influences the author of John infused into his work, and I have added some select quotes by Schweitzer to highlight the Greek philosophy evident in this Gospel.

In a handful of places, I tightened up word use or phrasing where, though I was in the ballpark, it was not technically correct the way it was originally stated. For example, in the discussion of Isaiah 14, I originally stated that the fall of Satan was not listed in the Bible. It is not in the Hebrew Bible; it is, however, listed in Revelation 12:7-9. The discussion on the origin and evolution of the satanic character became the third major update, as I added further background and references such as where this story occurs in the Qur'an and other apocalyptic books from the turn of the era, and how the association with Isaiah 14 happened in the first place.

A fourth noteworthy addition came from Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford University, which includes further background on the Vatican claims to primacy through the late-fourth century elevation of Peter, and the seismic impact of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. New content covers the Chalcedonian Schism, a split which remains to this day, detailing how Christendom separated into imperial (with the Byzantine emperors dictating compromise creeds) and the non-imperial Churches of the Oriental Orthodox; and how these non-Chalcedonian sects in the East came to be the ones who influenced Islam and their version of Abrahamic monotheism.

A selection of other notable updates surround events which occurred after the first edition was published in 2013, such as the election of Pope Francis and his supposed admission that there was no hell in 2018; the series of Irish referendums of the past few years which have dramatically liberated their society from the Catholic yoke; and the Israel Museum exhibit for the Exodus in 2016, which was nothing more than an empty room. Further additions include: the Holy Land chronology in Table 1, a topical index, and updated hyperlinks in the bibliography.

The 2023 third edition consisted of minor corrections in the text.

Table 1 – Holy Land Chronology

Judah (~1000-582 BCE), independent kingdom, then Assyrian vassal (740-)
Yehud (582–539 BCE), Babylonian province
Yehud Medinata (539-332 BCE), Persian satrapy
Coele Syria (332-161 BCE), Ptolemaic, Seleucid province
Hasmonean Judea (161-37 BCE), Priestly vassal, then independent kingdom (141-)
Herodian Judea (37 BCE-6 CE), Roman vassal
Galilee (37 BCE-44 CE), Roman vassal
Roman Judaea (6–135), Roman province
Syria Palaestina (135-390), Roman province
Palaestina Prima (390-636), Byzantine province
Jund Filastin (636-1099), Caliphate province
Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099-1187, 1192-1291), Crusader state
Palestine (1187-1192), Ayyubid Dynasty
 (1291-1516), Mamluk Sultanate
 (1516–1920), Ottoman Empire
 (1920-1948), British Mandate
State of Israel (1948-), independent state
State of Palestine (2012-), semi-autonomous occupied state

Source

Reference Guide

Characters in *Manifest Insanity* / *Dr. Strangelove*:

U.S. President Merkin Muffer . . . President Merkin Muffley
Colonel Lionel Manslake . . . Group Captain Lionel Mandrake
General ‘Puck’ Rigidson . . . General ‘Buck’ Turgidson
Brigadier General Jack D. Rimmer . . . Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper
Major Dong . . . Major ‘King’ Kong
C.S. Ambassador Sal F’Abusi . . . Soviet Ambassador Alexi de Sadesky
Dr. Dieter Mannlove . . . Dr. Strangelove
Ms. Knott . . . Miss Scott
C.S. Prime Deacon Damien Ball . . . Soviet President Dmitri Kisov

Other References:

Major Major . . . *Catch-22*
Deacons . . . *The Handmaid’s Tale*
Jeff Spicoli, Linda Barrett, Mr. Vargas, Mr. Hand . . . *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*
Mr. Hobbes (Bible Study) . . . Thomas Hobbes, a 17th-century political philosopher
Miss Trevalio (Civics and Government) . . . an anagram of Voltaire, itself an anagram
Richard Torquemada (High Inquisitor) . . . Tomás de Torquemada, Spanish Inquisitor General; with a nod to J.K. Rowling and my favorite *Harry Potter* book, *The Order of the Phoenix*
Cahulawassee River . . . *Deliverance*
Homage to Douglas Adams . . . *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*; *Life, the Universe and Everything*; don’t panic and forty-two from *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*
Saturday Night Live references: Dana Carvey as the Church Lady in *Church Chat*; Mike Myers in *Coffee Talk* and as Dieter in *Sprockets*
Manifest Destiny . . . A 19th-century ideological justification for American expansionism
Diogenes of Sinope . . . A 4th-century BCE Greek philosopher and one of the founders of cynicism; a harsh critic of humanity who despaired at the lack of reason in the world and was disdainful of obtuseness in general
Mayberry . . . a fictional and idyllic rural community, representative of the “small-town American values” harped on ad nauseam by those on the political right
Most biblical references listed are taken from the King James Bible due to the fundamentalist panty-twisting hysteria that erupted over the “heretical, liberally biased” new translations of the Revised Standard Version and the flock’s insistence on using only the divinely inspired and superior King James Version (or others like the New International Version). I have stuck with the KJV for consistency, except in one or two cases where the NIV provided more definitive phrasing to clarify the point under discussion.

Chapter 1:

Only two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former.
Albert Einstein

In The Not Too Distant Future . . .

Shortly after the inauguration of President Barack Obama, creationist forces from the Kansas State Board of Education and other evangelicals from conservative southern states, disturbed by left-wing liberal policies and the backward slide of society into hell, succeeded in creating a breakaway fundamentalist republic: The Christian States of America. Repelled by ideas of tolerance towards gay marriage, abortions, and worst of all . . . free thought, the sixteen Bible Belt states—from Virginia to Florida in the east, Kansas to Texas in the west and all the states in between—seceded from the Union and withdrew into theocratic isolation. Slamming the door on the modern world, the C.S.A. became a nation of pickup trucks, guns, and literal interpretations of the Bible.

The new theocratic republic, nicknamed by citizens of the remaining United States as the Uptight States of Absurdica, lost no time in adopting a more inspirational national flag by adding a cross and grouping their sixteen stars into a Jesus fish. They also drafted their own Declaration of Independence:

We hold our Christian fundamentalist truths to be all the evidence you need. The doctrine of separation of church and state is hereby vacated. The Lord's Prayer is forthwith reinstated. So it is written, so it shall be, forever and ever, Amen.

The leader of the country, the Prime Deacon, received guidance from his council of advisers: Deacons Beck, Limbaugh, and O'Reilly. The Holy Trinity, as they were lovingly referred to by their flock, provided their particular brand of wisdom to ensure the infant nation was destined, manifestly, to march onward unto glory.

The new national capital was selected for its merits as a bastion of Christian values. Nashville, being the home of wholesome country music—Shania Twain and her shamefully bare-midriff long ago deported back to Canada—is also the headquarters for many Christian organizations, such as the Methodists and the Southern Baptist Convention. It was the obvious choice for the capital, given the presence of a community of devout Christians ready and eager to fill the administrative ranks.

Many like-minded Christian organizations around the new country received national recognition and designation, such as The Holy Land Experience National Theme Park in Orlando, Florida which became a required annual pilgrimage for all citizens. And what spiritual adventure would be complete without a visit to nearby FUN!damental World:

Faith-based entertainment for the whole family: come for the fun, stay for the self-righteous satisfaction.

Burn effigies of Hollywood smut mongers and Democratic Congressmen.

Visit Inquisition Court and dress up as a fifteenth-century Spanish Inquisitor while you torture likenesses of Richard Dawkins, Charles Darwin, or Rosie O'Donnell into confession and conversion.

Enjoy rounding up pairs of sheep and herding them into our Noah's Ark attraction. Closure Notice: We regret to inform our valued customers that due to an increasing number of complaints about inappropriate contact with the sheep, this exhibit will soon be replaced by our new Salem Village. Dress like pilgrims and enjoy locking your sister in the stocks for speaking out of turn, or drop witches into the carnival dunk tank.

Rejoice in that eternal favorite, the Parting of the Red Sea Water Park. Visitors can swish down the Mount Sinai waterslide, enjoy a relaxing tube ride down the Jordan River, or splash around in the Sea of Galilee wading pool where guests can practice performing baptisms.

When it's time for a break, savor the feeding of the five thousand in our Loaves and Fishes Food Court.

Of course, late-night talk show hosts and the popular media lost no time in dubbing the place Fun-Duh!-Mental Ward, which, to the mortification of right-thinking persons in the C.S.A., caught on like wildfire.

The newly rechristened National Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, with its realistic displays of Adam and Eve's descendants coexisting with saddle-wearing dinosaurs six thousand years ago, was selected over other candidates as a shrine for its unfailing dedication to preserving higher truth in education. The Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas became the National Cathedral. The National 'Think Tank' of the Discovery Institute, with its Center for Science and Culture, relocated from pagan Seattle to their new headquarters in the land of the enlightened. The Discovery Institute, with their counterparts at Answers in Genesis, lost no time in developing the newly revamped fundamentalist school curriculum. Their creed, which was stamped into every textbook courtesy of the Texas State Board of Education, is: 'All I needed to know I learned in the Bible.'

Other national agencies were created with specific government mandates. The Puritan Department, known colloquially as 'The Ministry,' has official oversight for censorship and editorial control over all print publications, including school textbooks, effectively suspending freedom of the press. Likewise, its partner in broadcast media, the Christian Federal Communications Commission (C.F.C.C.) oversees the regulation of the airwaves ensuring that only decent and moral programming with family values are beamed into people's homes, such as *Leave It to Beaver* re-runs, the *Left Behind* series, and Deacon Kirk Cameron's inspirational infomercials.

Deacon Pat Robertson, famous for his all-knowing understanding of natural disasters and their supernatural cause and effect, was selected to be the director of C.E.M.A., the Christian Emergency Management Agency. When the first catastrophe struck Tornado Alley in the heart of the Christian States, the press inevitably asked him what the devout citizens of Jesus Nation could possibly have done to warrant such destruction. He replied in an uncharacteristically low-key manner, 'Sometimes shit just happens, deal with it.' He took no serious efforts to help those in need, as they obviously must have done something to deserve God's retribution for some imagined slight. Even though his mandate was to implement emergency response measures, his entire divinely inspired plan consisted of nothing more than handing out bottles of water, paper towels, shovels, and garbage bags, along with the cheerful, but empty platitude, 'The Lord helps those who help themselves; now off you go.' The executive members of *The 700 Club* finally decided it was time to put him out to pasture and he retired to a life of quiet contemplation.

The Office of Christian Morality—appointed with wide-ranging powers of oversight to ensure policies across the spectrum conformed to established puritanical doctrine—embarrassed a government already plagued by continuous ineptitude when several high-ranking officers were forced to resign in disgrace. Unfortunately for the government and their official propaganda on the matter, a foreign tabloid television exposé revealed the extent of the hypocrisy within the ranks of the O.C.M. when it aired undercover footage of an alcohol-fueled, drug-induced, prostitute-supplied orgy in a Las Vegas hotel room. This taxpayer-funded junket—supposedly a spiritual retreat to a sanctuary on the Cahulawassee River in Georgia for these pious elders to have some quiet reflection and self-flagellation—was brought to public attention after efforts by the C.F.C.C. to suppress the story failed. Attempts to jam the signals from U.S. transmitters were unsuccessful and the whole sordid affair, captured on hidden camera, leaked into the homes of a chaste and very shocked populace.

Outraged citizens, disgusted at such blatant double standards, rechristened the O.C.M. as the Office of Carnal Mischief. Tearful apologies were offered on numerous televangelist programs, as the former officials made the rounds pleading forgiveness for their wayward sins and blaming Satan for leading them astray. The whole affair brought back painfully uncomfortable reminders of Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and a trainload of other spiritual leaders who had let their financial donors down by exposing themselves for the charlatans they were.

Discrimination against non-Christians was not legally sanctioned, as freedom of religion was grudgingly paid lip service, just so long as that religion was a Christian denomination. Unofficially, undesirable persons were openly encouraged to emigrate of their own free will. Indeed, many quickly fled the Gulag Christopelago for more receptive hosts. Undesirables include, but are not limited to: pro-choice advocates, homosexuals, artists, liberal elites, and just about everyone who isn't a God-fearing, card-carrying N.R.A., right-wing, evangelical Christian. Non-Christian citizens were subtly shown the door through the extension of tax breaks and preferential school placements to those of the proper persuasion and affiliation . . . unless of course, they found the light, in which case they were warmly welcomed into the fold. However, the population of the C.S.A. is maintained through net migration. The influx of God-fearing Christians from

northern regions, those seeking a safe haven from the secular oppression of local school boards and their stubborn insistence on the separation of church and state, canceled out the emigration of non-Christians moving to the U.S.

Women in the C.S.A. are encouraged to be stay-at-home moms and domestic engineers, as divorce is discouraged and family values with respect for the husband and father emphasized in a return to more traditional gender roles. Welfare, that most abhorrent of liberal socialist policies, was abolished in place of fair pay for hard work, especially since all those job vacancies opened up once women dutifully left the workforce and returned to their proper place. It need not be said that the most despicable heresy of all, abortion, the callous murder of soul-infused embryos which inflamed the passions of fiery evangelical proliferers, was outlawed in the Christian States so that women could return to their natural, God-given role as reproductive baby factories.

Finally, two national monuments were erected to commemorate the founding of the Christian States. One is a colossal statue of Jesus in Miami, Florida modeled on the Statue of Liberty. Northerners scornfully refer to this imitator as the Statue of Irony, given the severe restrictions on personal freedoms in the theocracy. However, this Lordly Liberty impersonator had a few slight differences from the original. This statue wears a crown of thorns, triumphantly raises a cross, and holds a Bible with a date inscribed: December 25, 1 AD. The statue was strategically placed in South Beach, Florida by Christian planners to atone for its past Sodom and Gomorrah ways as a thriving gay nightlife area, and as a way to welcome migrants fleeing the intellectual persecution of the secular northern states as they sailed into Miami harbor. The only remaining hint of the old South Beach days was the blue neon outline of the cross at night.

The other national monument was a polished marble cross, one hundred feet tall, standing proudly in front of the Kansas State Board of Education building with a bronze plaque reading:

In honor of those who courageously blazed a trail for God. We give our eternal thanks to those who fought valiantly in the Creationism versus Evolution Hearings to bring truth to the children. You will never be forgotten. Praise Jesus, Jimmy, and Jerry. Amen.

Chapter 2:

Everywhere he looked was a nut, and it was all a sensible young gentleman like himself could do to maintain his perspective amid so much madness.

Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

Meanwhile, At Gargleson Air Force Base Outside San Francisco . . .

An insidious force of missionaries is gathering in the Christian States, preparing for an invasion of U.S. territory in hopes of triggering the rapture. This army of infiltrators is plotting to sneak across the border into the United States and quietly assimilate into suburban neighborhoods. Once settled, they will slowly begin to spread the fear of eternal damnation among an innocent and unassuming population, along with their message of salvation, in an attempt to recruit souls upon whom they can impose their way of thinking. The countdown has started to launch . . . the Judgment Day Device.

General Jack D. Rimmer, commanding officer of the 69th Fighter Wing of the 25th Air Force, reporting to Air Combat Command, called to his aide. “Airman, would you come into my office, please.”

“Yes, General Rimmer?”

“Airman, I want you to bring me the folder for Attack Plan R, and call the operations group commander and tell him to report to my office immediately.”

“Of course, General. Will there be anything else, sir?”

“No thank you, Airman. Just the documents, please. That will be all. Dismissed.”

Shortly after the aide left there was a quick rap on the door. “Enter,” barked Rimmer.

“You asked to see me, General?” said the air-ops commander, Colonel Manslake, standing at attention in his immaculately pressed uniform.

“At ease, Manslake. Come and have a seat. I have an urgent matter to discuss with you. Colonel, I have received orders from the National Command Authority, crucial orders that if successful will reunite our fractured republic. Our intelligence services have uncovered a sinister plot indicating that forces within the Christian States are planning to launch an assault against the minds of our children. The president has ordered that we deliver a preemptive blow of our own to take out their ability to launch a strategic first strike. We’re taking the wrath of God to the Christians, Manslake.”

It took a few moments for the gravity of the general’s news to sink in before the colonel was able to speak, and then he asked, “We’re going to war, a real shooting war, with the Christians?”

“Yes, Manslake, we are now officially at war with the Christian States and President Muffer has consequently raised the alert status for all U.S. forces to DEFCON 1. In accordance with this situation, my first order to you is to put our security forces on alert and seal the base. We must prevent any knowledge of our preparations leaking to potential Christian spies outside the gates who could forewarn their government of our impending attack. As of this moment, OPSEC One is now in force and strict security protocols will be followed by all base personnel, including a ban on internet access and the confiscation of all smartphones, radios, or any other personal electronic devices which could be used by Christian forces to issue orders to sleeper agents hidden within our ranks.” OPSEC, or Operational Security, is a series of precautionary measures with increasingly tighter protocols, Level One being the highest, designed to reduce or eliminate potential communication leaks which could compromise mission integrity by the accidental dissemination of valuable intelligence to the enemy.

“Yes, General Rimmer. I will see to it at once”

The airman returned with the folder for Attack Plan R, handed it to the general, turned and left just as quickly, closing the door behind him on his way out. “Manslake, I want to go over the mission profile with you. I hold in my hand the battle orders for Attack Plan R—R for Reality—reality which we will bring to the rebel states by force of arms, whether they want it or not. Though, I suspect they are happy to remain in a state of blissful delusion. As the air operations group commander for the wing, I want you to get things in motion so we can scramble the fighters as soon as possible. Start by getting the ground crews fueling and arming the aircraft. Then assemble the flight leads in the briefing room and issue them their individual attack profiles first, and then brief the pilots of the entire wing as to the nature of the mission. Those orders,” the general said as he removed the typed instructions for Attack Plan R from the envelope and handed the paper to the colonel, “are to penetrate the airspace of the Christian States and seek their primary target

designations. The release of T-bomb weapons has been authorized. We will drive the dogma out of their science classes by any and all means at our disposal.” Colonel Manslake sat in stunned silence while the orders sank in. “What are you waiting for, Manslake? Hop to it, man.”

“Yes, General. I will see to it immediately, sir,” Manslake said rising to his feet to carry out his orders.

“One other thing before you go, Manslake. I filled the vacant commander slot for the 666th ‘Screamin’ Demons’ squadron.”

“Who did you get, sir?”

“I promoted from within the ranks and I chose to bump one of the flight leads up to lieutenant colonel and make him the new squadron leader. While you are issuing the orders to the ground crews, have Major Major come and see me so I can pin these new silver oak leaves on him.”

“You promoted Major Major?” Colonel Manslake asked in astonishment, foreseeing the end of the wing’s best inside joke.

“That’s Lieutenant Colonel Major now. You better get going, as we have a lot of work to do this morning.”

Colonel Manslake snapped to attention, saluted crisply with a brisk, “Yes, sir,” did an about-face and marched from the room at a quickened pace.

Chapter 3:

I would rather be descended from an ape than from a man of ability who misused his authority to stifle free discussions of the truth.

Thomas Henry Huxley, Oxford Evolution Debates (1860 - paraphrased)

Science Class At Ridgemont High, Kansas . . .

“Good morning class and welcome to another one of my profoundly enlightening lectures on the God-given wonders of biology,” Mr. Vargas, the perpetually spunky morning person, announced upon entering the classroom and greeting his first students of the day. The students, as is customary at the school, all stood by their desks in a sign of respect for the faculty until directed to sit by their teacher. “Before you are seated let us begin, as we start each day, by bowing our heads and reciting the Lord’s Prayer.”

The Hindu kid in the back of the class rolled his eyes and stared at the floor while the rest uttered the prayer in monotonous and mindless unison, amazed that his fellow classmates didn’t get how this wasn’t part of his life, and not in the least surprised that they didn’t care, either. There weren’t many non-Christians left in the area, as many had emigrated to the U.S. and only Christians would remain at the increasing rate that families were leaving. This, of course, was just fine with officials and their unspoken policy of non-inclusiveness, who seemed unaware of past examples of exactly this type of attitude in the name of some warped ideology, delighted in wishing these families a speedy trip. Buh-bye now, y’all don’t come back here.

As the prayer concluded, the young student’s attention returned to witness the next daily farce, “. . . the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen. Now class, please place your hands over your hearts as we recite the Pledge of Allegiance:

I pledge allegiance to Jesus and to the cross on which he stands. One Theocracy under God,
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all . . . Christians.

“Wonderful, please be seated.” And as typical teenagers shrouded in early morning mental haze, they sat down amid the usual cacophony of scraping chairs for yet another session of brainwashing, with the full backing of the state, at the hands of their narrow-minded educators.

“Today we will be starting a new chapter and learning about creation science, also known as intelligent design. If you will all take out your Bibles and turn to Genesis 1:1, we’ll start with the basics of all life in the universe. Miss Barrett, would you please come to the front of the class and read aloud for us.”

Linda Barrett, a tall, raven-haired, doe-eyed, seventeen-year-old beauty rose from her chair and demurely walked to the front of the class. Her full breasts strained to be free of the modest blouse buttoned up her long, elegant neck, and her floor-length skirt did very little to hide the world-class, perky butt that she swished seductively while she walked. Prudence be damned, it was impossible for this girl’s sexuality to be suppressed. The pheromones pouring out of her sent all the men around her—virtuous self-control or not—into a hormonal frenzy. Normally restrained and devout male teachers, unable to stop themselves, were quite fond of calling her to the front of the class on a regular basis just to watch her move. Hypocritical, but boys will be boys. You can try to nurture the sinful thoughts out of a good-natured Christian boy, but you can’t take the boy out of nature.

Infinitely aware of the effect the teen Lolita had on men, she played it up for all she was worth. With a staged nervous suck on her full, succulent, pouty bottom lip, batting her eyelashes with a coquettish smile, she began to read in her sweetest come-hither voice. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth. . . .” and every boy in the class had tuned out, lost somewhere in their own twisted carnal fantasies, doing deliciously naughty things to young Linda. Well, most of them. The overly repressed were busy mentally chastising themselves for having such wickedly perverted thoughts in the first place. ‘Forgive me, Jesus. I have sinned in my mind.’ If they could, the little closet masturbators would whip themselves until the devilish thoughts were purged from their tainted minds.

Finishing at Genesis 2:23, Linda wrapped up, “. . . and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

“Thank you, Miss Barrett. Please be seated.” Trying hard not to stare, but doing a miserable job of being subtle, Mr. Vargas couldn’t help watching Linda’s retreating backside with some degree of lust as she sashayed to her desk. ‘You want fries with that shake, you little tease?’ he thought. “Okay, so as we just

heard, the Bible tells us the Earth was created in six days. Also, that humankind was created in God's image, in its present form, along with all the beasts of the planet, in just one week. Now, some of you may have heard about an unproven fabrication called evolution. However, I can assure you that this nonsense has been *thoroughly* discredited as a working theory and so we will not be discussing such hypothetical and misguided ideas in this class.

"First, let's examine the word theory. The dictionary defines the word as speculation or an unproved assumption, as in I have a theory that dark forces are at work in our world trying to lead us away from God's truth."

"Excuse me, Mr. Vargas," interjected clean-cut, buttoned-down, straight-A student Jeff Spicoli. Jeff was the epitome of the model student every teacher dreams of one day discovering, except in his case he tended to know more than most of his teachers, which they found extremely annoying—especially since he always carried a tablet PC full of books and articles with which to challenge their opinions. "I think you may have overlooked some other definitions."

"Have I now, Mr. Spicoli? Is that not the generally accepted everyday usage of the term?"

"Yes, it is, Mr. Vargas. However, in this situation, we are not describing common usage, but scientific terminology to describe a set of principles and corresponding conclusions derived from empirical studies. If I may, I took the liberty of looking up and noting the official definition from the U.S. National Academy of Sciences in preparation for today's class," said the always eager beaver. "The scientific [definition](#) is: 'A plausible or scientifically acceptable, well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world; an organized system of accepted knowledge that applies in a variety of circumstances to explain a specific set of phenomena and predict the characteristics of as yet unobserved phenomena.'"

"Exactly, Mr. Spicoli, as yet *unobserved* phenomena. There is no definitive proof to support claims for evolution. Therefore, it is the opinion of enlightened minds that this evolution gibberish is nothing more than the work of the Devil to confuse and mislead the idle-minded. The Devil's playground, Mr. Spicoli, the Devil's playground," the teacher warned ominously.

"No proof? Who told you there was no proof? Have you ever heard of fossils? I presume you heard that there is no proof from your minister and a host of other pseudo-intellectual fundamentalist amateurs at Answers in Genesis. If you had bothered to set foot in a museum recently you would see the evidence that has been discovered in the last one hundred fifty years since the quest to find the proof began. Darwin said in his time that scientists didn't have the evidence to prove evolution yet, but that scientists needed to go find it—and they have. The skeletal remains of a number of intermediate ancestors have since been found, showing a clear trend towards modern humans."

"There are no fossils demonstrating this transition," Mr. Vargas dismissed the point casually.

"What about Ardi?" Jeff challenged.

"A what-y?"

"You said there are no fossils that demonstrate an evolutionary transition, so I'm not surprised you don't know about Ardi, especially since the discovery was likely to have been censored by the Ministry and the C.F.C.C. In any case, I highly doubt your TV ever changes from the *Bible Channel*—'all God, all the time'—to any documentary programming."

"Spare me your impudence, young man, and you will watch your tone in my classroom. Now then, please explain who, or what is this Ardi?"

"*Ardipithecus*, known as Ardi, is a hominid skeleton found in Ethiopia in the early 1990s that scientists have dated to four and a half million years ago. Ardi predates the previously oldest find, Lucy, by over one million years. Ardi is the earliest common ancestor to humans found so far, and the details of her discovery and analysis made news around the world in 2009—but apparently not here. Finds like Lucy, Ardi, and numerous other fossils collected since Darwin's day fill in the so-called missing link, or the gap in the fossil records you Christians like to focus on. And, despite the discoveries of all these fossils, anti-evolution creationists still like to pretend there is no evidence. Though, intelligent design proponents dismiss these archaeological finds offhandedly, as I am sure you are about to do."

Quite predictably, Mr. Vargas did exactly as Jeff said he would. "What proof is there that this skeleton was not an isolated species, completely separate from the human race that merely shared some characteristics with humans and died out long ago?"

"What proof is there that God created the universe in only six days?" Jeff retorted. "Why don't you take the time to find the information about Ardi and examine it for yourself? I'm not a biologist, but I presume you have some formal training in this discipline as an academic requirement for your qualifications to teach

this course. I am sure you will understand the science better than I could possibly hope to explain it. Not that you would bother to examine the evidence with an unbiased eye, anyway.”

“You still have not provided definitive proof that those fossils are our ancestors,” Mr. Vargas countered.

“I presume you have heard of Neanderthals?”

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Vargas answered warily, not certain he liked where this line of questioning was going.

“So how do you account for the existence of this separate species of hominids, or the timeline of their extinction, from the perspective of young Earth biblical creationism? You can’t, because the authors of Genesis never mentioned them, and so you can’t realistically include them in your worldview without resorting to all kinds of mental gymnastics and apologetic nonsense to force their existence into your fairy tales.”

“Be careful, Mr. Spicoli,” warned Mr. Vargas, before Jeff continued.

“*Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* both descended from the same common ancestor, but took diverging evolutionary paths. The path taken by the Neanderthals led to extinction, either through interbreeding with our human ancestors, or being outcompeted for resources by them. Denying their existence doesn’t make the problem go away and creationist attempts to do so are pathetically unconvincing rationalizations.”

Switching gears from this losing argument, Mr. Vargas challenged, “If you believe in evolution and deny the existence of a creator, then how do you explain the order in nature, the wonders of the eye, and the human brain?”

“The argument from design—that order in the universe and a perceived design seen in nature indicates the master plan of a creator—is hardly conclusive proof that God exists. In reality, it is merely wishful thinking on the part of the faithful. I, too, had those thoughts a few years ago, as I stood in awe of the wonders of the universe and thought God must have provided such order from chaos, but the complexity we observe in nature can be explained without supernatural causes. Science can and does explain how life evolved slowly over time. It is science that demonstrates how genes provide the code for cells to form amino acids, which build proteins and enzymes that behave according to known properties of chemistry, and how changes can accumulate over multiple generations.

“A gene mutation that passes on a physical weakness or limitation has a higher potential of not being passed on by its inheritor. For example, a choosy sexual partner will decline to mate with a weaker member of the species, which prevents those traits from being passed to their offspring. That weaker mutation will then die out through the processes of natural selection. A gene that mutates and bestows a benefit, such as increased strength, agility, or intelligence, has a higher chance of perpetuating itself by surviving to reproduce in its host and becoming the dominant gene in successive generations. This process of natural selection and adaptation explains how our species, step-by-step and gene-by-gene, slowly evolved from primitive ancestors into modern humans.”

Linda joined in the discussion by asking, “But who programmed the DNA and genes to behave in such an organized manner? How do the cells know which type of thing, like skin or a toenail, they are supposed to make if there is no order? There has to be a designer,” she faithfully concluded.

“No sentient power programmed cells to behave like this. It is just the natural order of the laws of the universe.”

“And who set the laws of the universe?” Linda persisted.

“Why does there necessarily have to be a creator? Order can evolve from chaos and you can observe it yourself if you watch a flock of birds take flight. Hundreds of birds, in apparent disarray, materializing instantaneously in formation right before your eyes; it’s amazing to witness if you have ever watched it and it demonstrates the principles of spontaneous order so elegantly.”

“But these scientific explanations make no sense,” Linda declared, with the typical lack of comprehension from those who make no effort to understand something in the first place. “How can there be so much order with absolutely no external control?”

“How are the scientific explanations for evolution and molecular biology any less believable than religious claims that some invisible, supernatural deity is guiding the interaction of every atomic particle in the universe and reading the thoughts of billions of people simultaneously? The natural selection argument is a lot more believable and several orders of magnitude less complicated than creationism. Even if there is a creator deity, and I grant you this concession only for the sake of argument, does it necessarily follow that

the Judeo-Christian version of creationism should be taught in a science class? Is creationism a realistic account of how God brought the world into being and that he controls every aspect of nature?"

"Yes, because it is *our* belief that this is how God created and orders the universe, so that's why we want it taught in science class," Mr. Vargas interjected.

"Precisely; it is a *belief* and not a scientifically verifiable argument. We should leave the theological debates for discussions in a religious studies class and stick to teaching the scientific facts of evolution in the science class."

Linda continued stubbornly, "Evolution can't be true, because if humans evolved from apes, then why are there still apes?"

"Frankly, Linda, it is exactly that kind of bone-headed statement that demonstrates a complete ignorance of evolutionary processes by the staggeringly misinformed. Humans did not descend from apes, humans and apes shared a common ancestor millions of years ago. Humans and apes are distant cousins, with bonobos and chimpanzees as our closest cousins sharing roughly ninety-eight percent of our genome, who together share an even earlier common ancestor with gorillas."

"I am *not* descended from a monkey," Linda stated hotly. "Humans are created in the image of God and appeared on Earth in our present form. We did not evolve from pond scum!"

"You are free to believe that and persist in your ignorance, but as the renowned evolutionary biologist and zoologist, Richard Dawkins, wrote in *A Devil's Chaplain*—"

"Aha!" Linda burst out. "There you go, admitting it's the work of the Devil."

"Christ, you really are clueless. Look, there's the Devil behind you!" Jeff cried out suddenly, pointing to a spot just over Linda's shoulder, which startled her enough to make her jump and turn around quickly.

"Very funny, wise guy."

"I thought it was. Anyway, I suspect Professor Dawkins deliberately chose that provocative title to elicit exactly that kind of medieval reaction from the simple-minded, but it has nothing to do with satanic priests. Although, the title did significantly intrigue me enough to pick up the book and read it. In fact, the title pays tribute to Darwin and comes from a passage in which Darwin, who borrowed the phrase from Chaucer, ridicules the argument from design given how sloppy and wasteful nature can be. Surely, if God created all the living creatures on Earth, he could have done a much better job."

"What exactly is that supposed to imply?" Mr. Vargas demanded to know, visibly upset at this insult toward his creator's divine wisdom.

"It implies exactly what it sounded like. If God created us, then why do we have so many design flaws?"

"Like what?"

"Like the human appendix, an evolutionary leftover that doesn't seem to do much of anything, except to occasionally burst and poison the bloodstream. Or a little closer to home for we men, why don't you ask any elderly males of our species what they think of God and his waste management design for running the urethra through the middle of the prostate gland? Inquiring minds, and pressured bladders, would desperately like to know."

That seemed to stop the biology teacher in his tracks. He had no realistic comeback that would have sounded in any way credible, least of all to himself, as he suffered from a swollen prostate and was dreading his annual check-up.

When Mr. Vargas didn't answer, Jeff continued, "Where was I before we went off on this tangent? Oh right, the description from Professor Dawkins on our ancestors swinging through the branches of our family tree, outlining how primates took separate paths down the long and winding evolutionary road. So, getting back to the quote from *A Devil's Chaplain*," Jeff said, picking up his tablet and scrolling between highlighted passages to summarize the information:

We are African apes, closer cousins to chimpanzees and gorillas than they are to orang utans and gibbons, let alone monkeys. . . .

. . . By taking a group of animals with a rich fossil record and dating the splits in their family tree two ways – by the molecular genetic clock and by radioactive clocks – the arbitrary units of the genetic clock can be validated, and simultaneously calibrated in real millions of years. This is how we can estimate that the split between humans and chimpanzees occurred between 5 and 8 million years ago, the split between African apes and orang utans about 14 million years ago, and the split between apes and Old World monkeys about 25 million years ago.

“Doesn’t that just blow your mind? Gorillas are closer cousins to humans than gorillas are to monkeys and orang utans! What an incredibly fascinating discovery.”

“No, Mr. Spicoli, it most certainly does not blow my mind, because it is not true.”

“How can you say that it’s not true?”

“Mr. Spicoli, I assure you, if evolution were real we would be able to observe it in action.”

“There are examples of evolutionary changes that scientists have witnessed in a single human lifetime. How else do you explain the phenomenon of bacteria that have evolved a resistance to antibiotics within a generation or two? Further, how else do you explain the high-altitude physiological and genetic adaptations of peoples living on the Tibetan and Andean plateaus to cope with low-oxygen environments, especially considering that the Tibetans and Andeans have evolved different ways of acclimatizing, with those on the Tibetan plateau having done so only within the time since David and Solomon?”

“That is just the Lord moving in his mysterious ways, punishing us for our sins.”

“Right. Well, never mind then.”

“Just a minute, Mr. Spicoli, where are you getting all these spurious scientific claims from? None of this information is approved for sale or consumption by The Ministry, and all the pro-vaxx agitators were imprisoned and sent to reeducation camps.”

“My parents accumulated a library of free thought writings before the establishment of the Christian States; and despite the thought control of our little theocracy, this isn’t a police state where the possession of questionable materials gets us dragged off to a dungeon in the middle of the night by religious police.”

“It should be,” muttered Mr. Vargas under his breath.

“Speaking of censoring academic works, you might also find it interesting that the United States does not recognize the qualifications of a single degree holder from our country. It is no accident that the ranking of every university in the Christian States has been downgraded to the equivalent of a fundamentalist Bible college, due to the infusion of religious ideology into so many aspects of our academic curriculum. The *only* professional designation that gets even grudging acceptance in the U.S. job market is the C.E.A., the Chartered Evangelist Accountant. But, it is really only accepted on Wall Street where applicants are desired for their skills at skimming money from the collection plates, cooking the books, and hiding the loot in offshore accounts.”

“There is nothing wrong with our education system. Our national education policies produce a better-rounded student than a curriculum that only focuses on science and removes all discussion of God from the classroom. Science does not address why we are here, only religion does that,” Mr. Vargas stated.

“Science doesn’t claim a need to explain the why, that’s a question for philosophers. But, if the faithful really need to know why, then it can be a question for religion. So, can we please stick to discussing science in this class? If we could get back to your statement on observing evolution in action, I am sure you realize most evolutionary processes take place over millions of years, which makes it impossible to directly observe the majority of changes that have occurred. However, by the fundamentalist Christian belief in a six-thousand-year history, we haven’t been here long enough for the evidence for hundreds of millions of years of evolution to be considered relevant. Therefore, because of the difficulties inherent in observing evolution in action, and the fundamentalist’s literal belief in the accuracy of biblical chronology, the entire intelligent design argument is predicated on the idea that creationism must be factual by default.”

“Exactly,” Linda said, thickly.

Jeff sighed in total exasperation and proclaimed, “Intelligent humans can try to make things as idiot-proof as possible, but nature will just find a way to build a bigger idiot. Literal creationists are living proof of the power of nature to evolve higher forms of stupidity. If that alone isn’t a beautiful demonstration of evolutionary processes, then I am at a loss to provide a more definitive example.”

“Why do you look at me when you say that?” Linda asked, in a huffy tone.

“I just call them as I see them. Okay, so setting aside evolution, what about all the astronomical and geological data that proves the universe is roughly fifteen billion years old and the Earth is five billion years old—not the six thousand years of the biblical timeline?”

“All those signs are irrelevant, Mr. Spicoli. God only does that to test our faith. ‘It’s more important to know the Rock of Ages than the age of rocks.’”

“I presume you know that the man you are quoting was ultimately discredited in a court of law and shown to be an incompetent buffoon.”

“Who was that?”

Jeff muttered quietly to himself, “Dear Lord, give me strength ‘for ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise.’”

“What was that, Mr. Spicoli?”

“I was just whispering a silent prayer, sir.”

“Really now? I find that hard to believe, given your very public stance on religion. What exactly were you praying for?”

Thinking quickly, Jeff replied, “Ah, the Serenity Prayer, sir. ‘God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’”

“I see, and where do I fit in? Am I the one you think you can change, or am I the one you need the wisdom to know and accept that I stand firm in my beliefs, and no matter what an insufferable know-it-all student like you can say, nothing will change my mind?”

“Um, neither, sir. I was just attempting to calm and center myself before continuing. I just find it odd that you seem to delight in using the Rock of Ages quote with determined authority, yet you are neither aware of who said it and in what context, nor the public humiliation this person underwent for his fundamentalist beliefs three years later.”

“By all means, Mr. Spicoli, enlighten the class as to the circumstances of that noble quote,” Mr. Vargas said, turning the discussion over to Jeff.

“Mmmkay,” Jeff began, “it was the defender of the Christian faith, William Jennings Bryan, who said this in a speech against evolution before a crowd of evangelicals at the Hippodrome in New York in 1922. By 1925 he was exposed as a closed-minded fool during the Scopes monkey trial.”

“Aha, Mr. Spicoli, that’s where you’re wrong. You’re not as smart as you think you are, after all. Bryan won the trial and Scopes was found guilty, a vindication for the Christian faithful against Godless science. You might want to check your facts,” Mr. Vargas said, smugly.

“Forgive me if I respectfully disagree, Mr. Vargas. I have here an essay on the trial that I wrote for my law class tomorrow, and I think it is you that might need to check your facts.”

“How dare you, you little—”

But Jeff cut him off and continued, “First of all, the trial judge—who was also a lay Methodist minister, a blatant conflict of interest if ever there was one—was so shamefully biased against the defense that he demonstrated his contempt towards them by reading the entire first chapter of Genesis during the Grand Jury hearing. The judge also opened each court session with a prayer, which the defense finally objected to on day three of the trial on the grounds that this biased display against the defendant was adding to an already hostile atmosphere within the evangelical community.”

“You think the judge should have been excused, just because he was a religious man?” Mr. Vargas challenged.

“Of course, he should never have been allowed to hear this case. Any competent lawyer in today’s more secular society would have easily gotten a judge so overtly religious removed from a case that so closely related to the judge’s faith. But this was early twentieth-century rural America and the rules didn’t seem to apply evenly, or fairly, back then. Even on appeal the justices were obviously influenced by their Christianity and overruled the legitimate challenges to blatant violations of the Bill of Rights. This was definitely not the most impartial moment in the history of American jurisprudence if a judge’s personal theological views can so easily sway their legal opinions in order to subvert the Constitution in such a transparent manner.”

“So, you are saying God has no place in the courtroom?”

“Justice is supposed to be blind.” Like you and every other creationist, Jeff thought to himself.

“God enlightens the minds of men and provides the proper direction with his spirit. It would, therefore, have been just and proper for the judge to seek heavenly counsel in such matters.”

“If you say so,” Jeff replied, barely concealing his contempt for the total ignorance of American law Mr. Vargas was demonstrating. “Okay, so then let me disregard the judge’s character and focus purely on the legal issues. The judge refused to allow expert defense witnesses to testify and he instructed the jury to disregard the issue of whether the unconstitutional law that had been broken even had merit or not, but only to consider the violation of it by Mr. Scopes teaching evolution to his class.” Jeff quickly scanned his essay for the right paragraph and then continued, “The law in question, known as the Butler Act, was a Tennessee [statute](#) which made it unlawful for any teacher in a publicly funded school ‘to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.’ The fact that this state law was unconstitutional—it was hopelessly one-

sided in favor of Judeo-Christian theology and was in violation of the principles of freedom of religion guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution—was conveniently ignored.

“Presumably, the judge did not declare the law unconstitutional, because in his mind the constitutional issue was a matter for the legislative branch and not the courts. That opinion would have been rather silly given that it ignored and set aside over one hundred years of the precedent of Judicial Review, which granted exactly this power to judges in the systems of checks and balances. The judge did have the right to declare the law unconstitutional and dismiss the case, but he wanted the national publicity the trial brought to him. He was also itching for a showdown with this uppity science teacher for daring to defy this biblically inspired legal mandate, and so he pushed the case through to trial. The jury was left with only one option, to vote guilty on a technical violation of the Butler Act. Ultimately, the conviction was set aside on appeal due to a technicality in the state Supreme Court. The judge, exceeding his authority—possibly in his Christian zeal to persecute Mr. Scopes—took it upon himself to set the fine over what he was legally allowed to impose, as he should have left it for the jury to decide.”

“Mr. Spicoli, you have failed to prove anything. Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution, thereby winning a victory for creationism in the American legal system,” Mr. Vargas gloated naively.

“The state lost in the end,” Jeff rebutted.

“The state lost only on a minor technicality. He was still found guilty of violating the law . . . and God’s scripture,” Mr. Vargas added as an afterthought.

“It was a violation of an unconstitutional law, and one that was only repealed in 1967.”

Mr. Vargas sputtered in a dismissive tone, “U.S. law no longer applies here in the Christian States, nor is it infallible.”

“Unlike the Bible.”

“Exactly, Mr. Spicoli, exactly.”

“So, the fact that the trial and appellate court judges, who were blatantly prejudicial in choosing to ignore the First Amendment by illegally favoring Judeo-Christian dogma, made a mockery of the U.S. justice system is okay with you?”

“My poor, misguided boy. When it comes to upholding God’s laws, the law of man is insignificant and should be set aside by any and all means necessary,” Mr. Vargas answered, with an air of condescending righteousness.

Holy crap, Jeff thought. This guy is one of those Christian Right loudmouths who rant and rage against fundamentalist Islamic regimes who want exactly the same thing with Sharia law. The power of human will to overlook its own hypocrisy, deceive and fool itself, never ceases to amaze.

“I believe you also mentioned something about Mr. Bryan being discredited during the trial. How can that be, given that Bryan won?” Mr. Vargas inquired.

“When the trial judge unfairly refused to let the defense witnesses be heard, Clarence Darrow, one of the defense lawyers, cunningly called the prosecuting attorney, Bryan, to the stand instead. Under examination, Darrow ran circles around Bryan by forcing him to admit, under oath, that the world had to be far older than biblical chronology states. Bryan also revealed that he was ignorant of many other issues regarding biblical canon, like his lack of knowledge of other cultures, their stories, and their impacts on the origins of the Bible. I shouldn’t have to point out that such an admission about the biblical chronology being wrong would contradict the literalist and inerrant stance of fundamentalists.”

“You always have to be the know-it-all, Mr. Spicoli. Where is your proof for such arrogant claims?”

“I have direct quotes in my essay from the trial [transcripts](#) of the Darrow/Bryan exchange,” Jeff said waving his paper in the air. “Darrow went so far as to ridicule Bryan saying, ‘You insult every man of science and learning in the world because he does not believe in your fool religion.’ The back and forth condemnations between the two opposing camps escalated with Bryan claiming the defense’s only goal was to ridicule people who believed in the Bible. In reply, Darrow shot back with, ‘We have the purpose of preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States.’” Just like they do here in the C.S.A. Jeff thought to himself, as he wisely chose not to voice that unpopular truth.

“Further on in the examination, Bryan claimed that ‘the only purpose Mr. Darrow has is to slur at the Bible, but . . . I want the world to know that this man, who does not believe in a God, is trying to use a court in Tennessee—’ Darrow then cut him off and fired back: ‘I object to that . . . I object to your statement. I am exempting you on your fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on Earth believes.’”

“We here in the Christian States believe it, and I believe it,” Mr. Vargas declared sincerely. The operative word was *intelligent* Christian Jeff stopped himself from saying just in time. “Are you trying to imply that we are all fools, bigots, and ignoramuses?” he pressed on.

Jeff, knowing better than to answer truthfully, kept his mouth shut and let Mr. Vargas continue. “The trial was a victory for Christians against evolution and you have done nothing to demonstrate that Bryan was anything other than a voice of reason and light whose reputation has been unfairly tarnished by the secular forces of evil in the liberal media, of which you are obviously a complicit dupe swayed by their false propaganda. The Scopes case is a perfect example of the increasingly liberal intellectual hostility towards our cherished, traditional Christian beliefs. A hostility that still resonates as recently as the 2005 Dover, Pennsylvania school board evolution trial amply demonstrated, and which prompted the good Pastor Mummert to speak out about yet another round of secular attacks ‘by the intelligent, educated segment of our culture,’” Mr. Vargas stated with all the conviction he could muster, completely oblivious to the irony of the statement.

How do you compete with a mentality like this? Jeff wondered. It’s like arguing with . . . with, but he was at a total loss and too exasperated to think of anything as remotely absurd as this kind of mentality with which to liken his comparison. There was no point wasting energy and breath arguing with people like this because they wouldn’t bother to listen to the facts.

“So, Mr. Vargas, are you saying it doesn’t matter that your creationist *opinion* contradicts the entire careers and decades of *factual* research by anthropologists, biologists, geologists, paleontologists, and zoologists—people infinitely more qualified than you to render an informed verdict on the topic of evolutionary history—because, well, you just know?”

“Who says I am wrong?” Mr. Vargas challenged.

“Pretty much the entire scientific community says you are wrong. Okay then, let me use another analogy to make my point. The dinosaurs were wiped out sixty-five million years ago—wait, that’s a bad example. According to your biblical chronology, the Earth is only six thousand years old, so I can’t use that one. I suppose, to use fundamentalist reasoning, dinosaurs must have coexisted with Adam and the kids for only a few hundred years before they were all barbecued into extinction. Let me see, what else can I use, maybe Native American Indians? No, that’s no good either, because they migrated here from Asia twice as long ago as the Bible says the Earth is old. Sssshhh, don’t tell the Mormons, because they think the American Indians descended from the lost tribes of Israel and you say it’s impolite to criticize other people’s faith. Damn, it’s getting harder to think of an example you might actually consider; something within the last few hundred years, something relevant and localized that you might actually identify with. How about the massacre of Custer and his men at Little Bighorn? Do you concur that the Lakota and Cheyenne completely decimated the cavalry regiment?”

“Of course, we all know the story of Custer’s Last Stand,” Linda answered.

“Sure we do, but who says some biased historian with an agenda couldn’t have reversed the facts in favor of American propaganda and written it as a triumphant victory over the Indians? What if the Battle of Little Bighorn had been recorded that way by historians and perpetuated in school textbooks, despite evidence to the contrary, and reinforced by fiery patriotic pride? Would you defend it with the same certainty you give to creationism, even faced with the evidence that the account was such an obvious forgery?”

“No, I suppose not,” Linda answered honestly.

“So, why don’t you give the history of the Earth and the theory of evolution the same benefit of the doubt, merely because it stands in opposition to your belief in biblical stories? Why are you able to dismiss false information in one area, but have a completely different and irrational attitude towards anything else that directly contradicts the Bible?”

“Well . . . uh . . .”

“Exactly, that’s what I thought. I won’t go into Scientologists who believe in galactic confederacies and their blatantly obvious need for high-dose prescription pharmaceuticals to deal with their delusions of little green men, as they’re not a real religion. What do you think of the Book of Mormon and some of their bizarre teachings that are not shared by the rest of mainstream Christianity, like God coming from the planet Kolob to physically manifest himself in a human body so he could impregnate Mary?”

“I think they’re crazy.”

“Really, why do you think that? And shouldn’t their beliefs get the same respect you demand for yours?”

“Because everyone knows that Mormons are a heretical cult with oddball Christian doctrines,” Linda said obtusely, “that’s why.”

“Mormons don’t seem to think they have oddball doctrines. Or more realistically, they aren’t allowed to think. Any of their members that start to question are immediately excommunicated and cut off from their friends and family before the thinking virus can spread like wildfire through the rest of the congregation. Thinking for one’s self is a fatal bug to religion. However, can science disprove the idiotic Mormon belief about the Native American Indians coming from Israel?” Jeff queried, continuing the thought experiment.

“I suppose modern DNA evidence comparing Jews to American Indians would prove this belief is wrong,” Mr. Vargas admitted, honestly for once.

“Let me make sure I get your point. Mormons also have inerrant, literal beliefs that they are not allowed to question, lest they are outcast from their family and social support networks for daring to rock the boat. Beliefs to which mainstream Christianity doesn’t subscribe, beliefs which can and have been shown to be the pure fabrications of their quack founder, but you don’t give their beliefs the same hands-off respect you demand for your own doctrines. You don’t apply the same standard of historical evidence, scientific rationale and reasoning to your own fundamentalist biblical claims, but you are quick to dismiss Mormon beliefs—how utterly ironic and completely hypocritical of you.”

“My beliefs are the true word of God, given by the Holy Spirit to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John . . . and Paul,” Linda professed devoutly.

“You’re a total hypocrite, don’t you see that?”

“No, I’m not. I am a *true* Christian!”

“Listen, Linda, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. You don’t just get to pick and choose when you want to apply reason, and when you don’t, to suit your narrow purposes. You need to apply it fairly and consistently, even if it contradicts your own personal beliefs. You can’t disparage the Book of Mormon and hold the Bible above reproach in the same breath. To open one to critical examination is to open both. Fair is fair. If you can freely use your intellect to dismiss the goofy beliefs of one religion, you should be able to do the same for your own creationist beliefs where evolution is concerned. Evolution is a science, and science is about the rigorous application of standards to avoid personal bias influencing or skewing the results; though, of course, this does sometimes happen with scientists. Impartial standards are particularly necessary precisely because such prejudiced thinking leads people to make up their minds before they find the answer—an answer they then dismiss as faulty if it contradicts what they were expecting, even if it is the truth.”

“The Bible is God’s truth,” Linda protested stubbornly.

“Fine, whatever, I am not going to change your mind in that regard. But it seems we have veered off topic, so let’s get back on track and discuss how, according to Mr. Vargas, evolution is gibberish. If evolution is wrong and the biblical creation story is the truth, how do fundamentalist Christians explain whales and dolphins?”

“What about them, Mr. Spicoli?” Mr. Vargas demanded hotly.

“Scientific discoveries have proven that these air-breathing, ocean-dwelling creatures did not originate in the sea, but evolved from land mammals through evolutionary processes into an aquatic species.”

“Nonsense! Where do you come up with such absurd concepts?”

“*Scientific American*, *National Geographic*. Perhaps, as a biology teacher, you may have heard of these publications?”

“Watch yourself, young man.”

“If this concept is absurd, how do you explain why whales and dolphins have jointed bones in their fins and vertically moving spinal columns, as opposed to horizontally swishing tails like other fish species? How can you explain the fifty-three-million-year-old fossil of the *Pakicetus*, a land mammal with an ear configuration found in cetaceans like whales and dolphins, but in no other species?”

“Simply that God, in his mysterious and infinite ways, made two separate creatures that way—and certainly not fifty million years ago.”

Losing patience, Jeff tried a more sarcastic approach, “So, Mr. Vargas, can we expect in future chapters that you will not be teaching us the *theory* of gravity, but intelligent falling? Will you be teaching us astrology and not astronomy? Are you going to be teaching us abstinence-only education, rather than the science of sexual reproduction? I notice the local youth groups here on campus seem to be overly active in their zeal of promoting the evils of premarital anything. When do we start learning about the virtues of

eugenics, how stem cell research is an abomination, and that Charles Darwin and John Scopes are names to be stricken from all textbooks?”

“I don’t find your line of questioning amusing, Mr. Spicoli, nor helpful in facilitating a positive learning environment in this classroom.”

“Sorry, Mr. Vargas. I guess I just get carried away sometimes. Let me ask you a hypothetical question. What happens after the next mass extinction event and human civilization has been wiped off the Earth—seeing as humanity has quite obviously forfeited our mandate to have dominion over this planet—but all our non-biodegradable trash is still here? Maybe pandas and koalas will be the next species to rise to dominance. They don’t do much except lie around and eat the occasional bamboo shoot or eucalyptus leaf, so they won’t consume all the resources on the planet and breed out of control; like we humans do.”

“Move it along, Mr. Spicoli. What hypothetical point are you trying to make?”

“As Arthur C. Clarke postulated in his third law, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. So, will the next species to evolve self-awareness—sorry, that God incarnates—and who discover the remnants of our high-tech society, with items so far advanced from their primitive tools, be so awed by our obvious supernatural powers that it will ultimately influence them to deify and worship us as creator gods? Given the abundant and widespread distribution of idols, it will be evident to them that our chief god must have been the all-powerful Co-ca-Co-la. Examination of skeletal remains will indicate that some of our women, possibly priestesses, had gelatinous bags for breasts. Okay, new rule. ‘We must make our women more pleasing to the gods by modifying their breasts in order to mimic them. In fact, priestesses must have ritual sex with priests as often as possible in order to glorify these gods. Make sure someone carves that onto some stone tablets,’” Jeff concluded, irreverently.

“You’re not funny, Mr. Spicoli. Mocking God’s creation will not be tolerated in my classroom. I am tired of your antics and it is time I got back to my lesson plan. The Bible tells us how the universe was created, and in this class, we shall stick to what we know and believe in, which does not include the Devil’s deceptions.”

“Let me see if I understand this correctly,” Jeff interrupted. “When we turn in our essays on the origins of the universe, you’re telling us to completely ignore scientific journals or other thoroughly documented references, and that we should just use Genesis?”

“Exactly, moving on—”

“Boy, that’s going to be one short bibliography,” Jeff interrupted again, speaking his mind openly to the amused chuckles of several classmates. “Would you indulge me just a moment longer, Mr. Vargas, and allow me one more related scientific scenario to illustrate your point—just to make sure I am on the same academic wavelength with you?”

Mr. Vargas nodded his assent, though warily. Jeff began, “Say a student turns in a paper on global warming based only on a single source, perhaps a 2007 U.N. climate research [report](#) that claims the Himalayan glaciers will all be gone by 2035. The student has only bothered to use one reference and said reference turns out to be, oh, I don’t know, full of holes. Would you assign a failing grade to the paper for so dismally failing to meet academic standards and requirements, yes or no? Or, would you give it a pass, because the student really and truly believes in global warming, his heart was in the right place, the U.N. report says the U.N. is right so it must be true, and the glaciers will be gone one day anyway, so what difference does it make if he was off by a few hundred or thousand years; give or take a millennia?”

“Or, would you attempt to find the middle ground and try to satisfy both your professional and religious principles by seeking out some exhausting Christian apologetics nonsense from Answers in Genesis? Would you invent some irrational explanation for we lost souls that the glaciers aren’t really melting at all, that they are and will remain just as they always have been? Some rationale that claims the whole climate change scenario is really just a satanic plot, concocted by liberal secular humanists to trick the world into thinking that the glaciers have been melting for twice as long as the Bible says the Earth has been around. I ask you, in all seriousness, would you as a professional teacher fail that student for turning in such a specious argument?”

“Thank you, Mr. Spicoli. I have heard all I care to from the likes of you. I don’t need to justify myself to you, or lend credence to your questions by lowering myself to answer them. I have a lesson to teach and your constant questioning is disrupting the class for your fellow students. Please see me for detention after school. You will be writing lines for an hour, selected passages from scripture that might help to show you the error of your ways. Now, as I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted, the hypothetical speculation over the theory of evolution is not possible, because . . .”

Chapter 4:

If the historical faith of Israel is not in a certain way founded in history, this faith is erroneous and cannot command my assent.

Father Roland de Vaux, Dominican Priest, biblical scholar and Qumran archaeologist

Old Testament Bible Studies Class . . .

“Good morning everyone, please be seated,” the teacher said striding to his desk and placing his briefcase on top. “Let’s get started, as we have a lot to cover today. In this morning’s lesson, we will be discussing Moses and his role in the Egyptian captivity of the Israelites. Please take out your Bibles and turn to the book of Exodus,” he said, pausing to let the students find the appropriate passage.

“I will begin with a reading of chapter two and the adoption of Moses, please follow along in your Bibles.

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river’s brink. And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river’s side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, this is one of the Hebrews’ children. Then said his sister to Pharaoh’s daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child’s mother. And Pharaoh’s daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the women took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses, because I drew him out of the water.

“Excuse me, sir. May I make an observation?” interrupted a student.

“Yes, Jeff. How did I know you would be the first to throw the gauntlet?” asked the teacher, in a good-humored manner. Ironically, the Bible studies teacher, Mr. Hobbes, was the most liberal and open-minded teacher in the school and was the only faculty member to call his students informally by their given names. A young maverick in his late twenties, he was equally beloved by his students for his fresh ideas as he was maligned by the older and more inflexible staff members for the same reason. His progressive style actively encouraged open discussion and debate among his students to better facilitate learning, and more importantly, understanding, something frowned upon by the old guard.

“Mr. Hobbes, don’t you think it’s a bit strange that an Egyptian princess would give the kid a Hebrew name?”

“I never really thought of it that way before. I suppose you’re right and an Egyptian mother would be more likely to give her baby a name from her own culture. I presume you have a theory you’d like to share?”

“I do have a theory actually. Consider the examples of Pharaohs Thutmose and Ahmose, where ‘mose’ was a common Egyptian patronymic meaning ‘child of,’ like the ‘Mac’ in Mackenzie of Scottish family names, or ‘Ben’ in Hebrew as in David Ben-Gurion. This would make much more sense in the context of Moses being an Egyptian name, given by an Egyptian mother, and that the name later became part of, and absorbed into, Hebrew culture where it took on its own Hebrew meaning because of this legend.”

“Mr. Hobbes, I think this sort of questioning is out of line and borders on blasphemy,” Linda protested. “Who are we to question God’s word? We are here to learn of God’s glory, not to make a mockery of his teachings.” the naïve young vixen proclaimed.

“Excuse me, but what is the name of this class?” Jeff responded. “It’s not Bible reading. As far as I am aware the active word is *study*, which implies analysis on some level or other. We can’t examine the passages in a vacuum, as they must be studied, dissected, deconstructed, examined critically, and not just mindlessly regurgitated. Critical study is even more important today, especially with the huge amounts of new information available to us in the modern age. If we are to have any hope of an accurate comprehension

of the Bible's meaning, we need to factor into any study the results of years of academic research and new archaeological evidence that reveals fascinating new aspects. In his 1943 encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, or inspired by the divine spirit, Pope Pius XII [wrote](#) that we must consider 'without neglecting any light derived from recent research.' That sounds like a convincing endorsement to me for a serious and complete contemplation of all the sources available to us and not sticking with outdated theological premises just because that is what tradition dictates."

"But, Mr. Hobbes, I—" Linda persisted.

"Linda, your concern is noted. But Jeff has a point, and if the bishop of Rome was of the opinion that new evidence helps our understanding, then one can hardly argue when even an institution famous for its steadfast refusal to join the modern world says it might be worth a look."

A visibly unhappy and chastised Linda sulked in righteous silence, which was quite distracting for some of the guys who really didn't want to listen to this boring discussion in the first place.

Jeff wondered aloud, "What is the big deal about critically examining the Bible? Why do reasonable and open discussions generate such hostility, especially when modern scientific methods and ongoing research and analysis could go a long way to debunk some of the more outlandish myths in the Bible and shed more historical light on the subject?"

"They are *not* myths and we do not *debunk* the Bible! We study the divine, absolute word of God as it relates to us, his children," Linda bellowed.

"Yeah right, you keep on believing that, sweetheart, if it lets you sleep at night. Unlike you, some of the others here may actually want to know the truth and not keep their heads stuck in the sand." Jeff grumbled, "Mr. Hobbes, don't you find it frustrating how any discussion of the Bible that strays away from a monotonous recitation and dares to venture into the realms of something approaching a critique provokes such hostility and resistance from the faithful?"

"Easy, Jeff. Faith is a very personal thing to people and change doesn't happen overnight."

"What change? All the evidence in the universe, literally, won't budge the truly devout an inch from the immovable convictions of their deeply programmed beliefs and most followers will never give the factual information the time and consideration it deserves. These committed literalists also fail to see the irony and the bias underlying their lame attempt to cite the Bible as an accurate authority in defense of itself and their beliefs. This kind of thinking is completely circular, and it is hardly a persuasive or valid line of reasoning, and yet they completely fail to see that. It's as if the power of God absolves them of their double standards, but I guess it is hard to fight such long-established traditions."

"What is wrong with tradition?" Linda demanded hotly.

"Norway lemmings throw themselves off cliffs every few years by tradition, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea. Tradition used to say the Earth was flat and at the center of the universe, a premise the Vatican used to defend by force until they could no longer reasonably hang onto such pigheaded dogmatism in the face of mounting scientific evidence and were forced to concede. Tradition is not synonymous with truth, despite what religious authorities desperately want people to think. An ancient belief that has clearly proven to be mistaken, even if it is deeply held, is still wrong and it is not reasonable to stubbornly hold on to an outdated belief purely because of faith."

"What kind of ancient beliefs have been proven wrong?" Mr. Hobbes asked inquisitively.

"Since we are in the Old Testament class, let's look at the legends surrounding the origins of the Hebrews, their scriptures, and some of the core Jewish beliefs that have been incorporated into Western history as accepted truths. Contrary to popular and profoundly held cultural and religious beliefs, the Israelites neither sprang into existence with Abraham around 1850 BCE, nor produced the books supposedly written by Moses sometime-ish around 1400 BCE. The Israelites did not yet exist during these times in history, but gradually emerged from the groups of regional nomadic herders *many* centuries later."

"Whoa, where do you get off making such a self-assured declaration, and one that so obviously contradicts thousands of years of Jewish tradition?" Linda demanded.

"There is plenty of evidence to contradict the Bible's version of its history, including Egyptian records that are oddly silent about major events described in Israel's earliest legendary history. Archaeological surveys have also revealed that there is no remnant of an Israelite civilization in the times alluded to in the earliest biblical chronology, such as a massive Exodus migration across the Sinai anywhere between 1550 and 1200 BCE. Or their supposed annihilation of Canaanite culture during the fictional Israelite conquest of their self-appointed, God-given lands."

"You can back this claim up, I presume?" Mr. Hobbes asked.

“Indeed; I can back it up. Despite the belief that the Israelites originated with the twelve sons of Jacob sometime around the eighteenth century BCE, it is only following the collapse of Late Bronze Age societies in the twelfth century BCE, an insignificantly minor timeline error of *only* six hundred years,” Jeff pointed out irreverently, “when we see the pre-Israelite ancestors emerging from the chaos and settling in the highlands of the region at the dawn of the Iron Age.

“The Bronze Age collapse and the upheaval that ensued was characterized by the breakdown of the great cultures that surround the Mediterranean region. Cultures such as the Mycenaeans in Greece, the Hittites in Anatolia, and the Egyptian New Kingdom which went into decline, withdrew from their Canaanite province and retreated back inside their borders. This widespread societal collapse was caused by the invasion of the Sea Peoples who arrived by sea from parts unknown, hence the name, disrupted the regional trading networks and destroyed numerous city-states. The chaos from the breakdown of trade and the lack of centralized government authority resulted in a dark age in which previously prosperous cities were abandoned and their populations dispersed.

“Recent archaeological surveys demonstrate that during this time of anarchy in the lowland plains, after trade had been disrupted due to the arrival of the Sea Peoples, was when the first wave of permanent settlements began in the highlands of Canaan. Nomadic herders, or Bedouin as we know them today, would have been forced to establish villages in order to grow their own grains and agricultural products, products for which they used to trade their goat meat and hides in the cities. Rather than conquering Canaan, these nomadic Israelites were themselves Canaanites, regional goat herders who had always been part of the indigenous population who settled down in the remote, unpopulated central mountain highlands.

“It was during this time of upheaval, with an absence of trading networks, that archaeologists first see the rise of a distinct Israelite culture several hundred years after the stories of Abraham and the Exodus are said to have taken place. However, it is likely that the invasion by the Sea Peoples, and the widespread disruption they caused, could be a historical basis for the Israelite conquest stories of Canaan as it would have been a significant event in their ancestral lore and communal legends.”

“That’s very interesting, Jeff. This is all new to me, but where did you learn this information from?” Mr. Hobbes inquired.

“From a book called *The Bible Unearthed* written by Israel Finkelstein, a Jewish professor of archaeology, and historian Neil Silberman. If this book was required reading in all school curriculums, then a significant amount of the population would be aware of just how far off Sunday school lessons are from historical reality. In this stimulating book, the authors meticulously outline recent archaeological discoveries which confirm that the Israelite community simply did not exist before the Iron Age, either in the archaeological or in the written records of surrounding cultures, despite the Bible citing several events before this point in history.”

“What about the books of Moses; if they weren’t written by Moses at these earlier points in history, then when were they written?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“The scholarly view, after hundreds of years of research, says the core writings came into existence in a unified format around 622 BCE, or eight hundred years after the generally accepted biblical tradition of Moses, circa 1400 BCE. However, two of the foundational ideologies that were incorporated into the core writings were circulating independently in the oral traditions of their separate regions two or three hundred years earlier than 622 BCE, but still several hundred years later than the chronology given in the Bible.”

“I don’t see how the date of the Bible’s creation is even relevant or how it diminishes the divine truth of the shared Judeo-Christian beliefs,” Linda snidely dismissed Jeff’s entire argument.

“I thought you fundamentalists believed in the absolute truth of *every* word, and now you’re just dismissing the timeframes as irrelevant to that truth? That is a rather convenient and casual attitude, to ignore certain aspects of your literal fundamentalist doctrine when doing so suits your purposes. But getting back to the point, the dating is certainly relevant from the perspective of the political forces at work in the seventh century BCE.”

“What do political forces have to do with the compilation of the biblical texts?” Linda asked.

“During the reign of Judah’s King Josiah, a golden opportunity arose that led to the creation of the biblical saga. That opportunity was the chance to take over the land of Israel to the north. First Josiah, from the House of David which ruled over Judah, needed to find a way to justify his territorial ambitions by convincing the Israelites of his mandate to rule over them and their land. This situation had arisen as thousands of Israelite refugees had migrated to Jerusalem over the past century as a consequence of the Assyrian conquest.

“By exaggerating a shared ancestral legacy through the patriarchal narratives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—a story that also emphasized a common origin for the differing religious beliefs—Josiah and his priests started to blend together the texts, legends, and religious traditions of the northern kingdom of Israel with those of Judah and their god, Yahweh. To exercise greater influence, Josiah made his Davidic dynasty the focal point of the monotheistic religious cult of Yahweh and made the Temple in Jerusalem—which the House of David just coincidentally happened to control—the center of sacrificial worship. By using these socio-political tactics—a manufactured family history with a religious common denominator as a historical justification to rule over Israel—Josiah was able to rally the people and consolidate their support behind him as their king by divine right. It was these political forces, at work in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, which put the biblical saga into its original context as a propaganda document for national unity.”

Linda blurted out, “The Bible is not political propaganda!”

“You wanna bet? That is precisely the correct term to describe the origins of the Bible, and biblical scholars would humbly disagree with your objection.” Jeff picked up his tablet and selected a book with lots of highlighted passages and began to read. “As stated in *The Bible Unearthed*:

The key to understanding the passion and power of the Bible’s great historical saga is a recognition of the unique time and place in which it was initially composed. Our story now approaches that great moment in religious and literary history, because it was only after the fall of Israel that Judah grew into a fully developed state with the necessary complement of professional priests and trained scribes able to undertake such a task. When Judah suddenly faced the non-Israelite world on its own, it needed a defining and motivating text. That text was the historical core of the Bible, composed in Jerusalem in the course of the seventh century BCE.

“Therefore, despite the devout beliefs of those from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the original books of the Hebrew Bible were written with a very specific political agenda in mind, and wishing it to be otherwise won’t make it so.”

“What kind of evidence is available that led scholars to these conclusions?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“Initially, scholars took note of a number of anachronisms—historical timeline errors—and started digging into the story. For example, if we were to talk about people in the 1950s and we mentioned cell phones and the internet, those would be anachronisms. The Bible is full of these mistakes, like listing people or places that don’t belong during the time in which they were placed by the biblical scribes in the epic sagas they were creating.”

“What kind of anachronisms?” an intrigued Mr. Hobbes probed.

“Just as the Israelites emerged from the aftermath of the Bronze Age Collapse, it was also during this period when the Philistines, settlers from the Sea Peoples invasion, arrived on the scene. The Philistines established their cities along the southern portion of the Canaanite coast around Gaza, and they did so without interference from the Egyptians who had by this time pulled back inside their traditional borders. As with the timeline error of several hundred years in the origins of the Israelites, this same mistake of referring to the biblically disparaged Philistines in times before their existence is yet another reference that is out of sync with historical reality.

“The Bible makes numerous references to the Philistines in the Bronze Age, starting with Abraham in Genesis 21:32-34: ‘Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Phichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines. And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God; and Abraham sojourned in the Philistines’ land many days.’ Given that the Philistines do not show up on the scene until the dawn of the Iron Age, just like the Israelites themselves, it is not surprising that the references to the founding of both peoples are equally confused and merged into the same imagined earlier timeframe. Obviously, in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE when the scribes wrote down their history several hundred years after the events described in the oral traditions, they made the error of considering ancestral legends to be historical facts. It does, however, illustrate the friction that would have existed between the highland settlers and the lowland invaders, as depicted in the battle between David and the Philistine warrior, Goliath, as the boundaries of these two peoples bumped up against each other.

“Jacob is also mistakenly referred to as a wandering Aramaean in Deuteronomy 26:5, though some biblical translations tend to gloss over this anachronism by using the word Syrian instead. Like the Philistines, the Aramaeans are later arrivals on the scene and don’t play any significant regional role until

the early ninth century when their kingdoms started to encroach on the northern borders of Israel. The biblical writers were extrapolating backward in time, making the mistake of projecting their times and circumstances into antiquity, over and over.

“The patriarchal narratives also mention camel caravans, cities, and specific goods traded via the Arabian trade routes which were not common, or nonexistent, until the time of the Assyrian Empire—*one thousand years later*. The mention of these details is very significant in that it reflects the times in which the writers were living, the experiences they were familiar with, and how they retroactively assigned these details to an invented past.

“If you associate Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the physical locations of the stories that surround their adventures, a pattern emerges placing each in a distinctly different region of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Abraham’s life centers in and around Hebron, near Jerusalem, in addition to his other wanderings throughout the Near East starting from Ur in Sumer, but he chose this area for his tomb, the Cave of the Patriarchs. The focus of Isaac’s life is in Beersheba, which is located in southern Judah at the edges of the desert; and Jacob’s story is primarily centered in the northern territories of the kingdom of Israel.

“A hypothesis has been put forward by scholars that these three men were independent local figures associated with the individual tribes of their respective regions, and that their stories were woven together in Josiah’s time to provide the ancestral justification for Judah’s ambitions to rule the northern lands. Given that Hebron is historically linked to the tribe of Judah as one of the administrative cities of the kingdom, that it was David’s capital before the biblical account of his being offered Saul’s throne, and because it was the scribes from Judah who wrote the Bible, it is not surprising that Judah, through Abraham, takes precedence in the family tree. By making Abraham the first patriarch, with Isaac and the southern lands of Beersheba placed second, and lastly Jacob from the desired northern lands—whose supposed offspring founded the twelve tribes of Israel in the family epic—Judah was able to claim precedence, while allowing the northern Israelites to feel included as they were absorbed into the kingdom of Judah. Taking all of the textual anachronisms, the lack of archaeological evidence for Israel in the Bronze Age, adding in the unrealistic life spans of the three patriarchs, and what emerges is a mythical, national father-figure saga—not an accurate history.

“While there is a shared historical Canaanite origin between the people of Judah and Israel, with some degree of cultural and religious overlap, it was not as close a relationship as the biblical authors would have us believe.” Jeff once again read from *The Bible Unearthed*, “Or as it says here, ‘That is why it is difficult to insist, from a strictly archaeological perspective, that the kingdom of Israel as a whole was ever particularly Israelite in either the ethnic, cultural, or religious connotations of that name as we understand it from the perspective of the later biblical writers. The Israeliteness of the northern kingdom was in many ways a late monarchic Judahite idea.’ And so, that is how a powerful family legacy was created in order to justify the political annexation of Israel’s territory.”

“But why would Judah want the lands of Israel?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“Josiah wanted the lands of the northern kingdom because the territory of Israel has always had the more temperate climate and fertile soils with better agricultural conditions for growing olives and planting vineyards. Contrastingly, southern Judah is barren and arid. So, with a covetous eye—wait, isn’t that prohibited by one of the Ten Commandments? Boy, the hypocrisy never ends. And so, with a covetous eye, Josiah turned his sights on the goods of his neighbor, as he sought to annex the territory, with its bountiful riches, for himself.

“The events that set the stage for Josiah’s opportunity had taken place a century or so earlier, in 732 BCE, when an upstart military officer named Pekah, from the still surviving northern kingdom, got the bright idea that he didn’t want Israel to be a vassal kingdom in the Assyrian Empire anymore. Someone had more ambition than brains, because the new Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III—and I know you’ve heard of him from 2 Kings 15:29—royally kicked his ass. Assyria not only reasserted their authority, they thoroughly destroyed the northern kingdom, deported the Israelites far and wide throughout their empire, and ruled the territory directly rather than leaving a humbled client king in place to pay tribute. This is one of the few historical facts the Bible actually gets right, and one that is corroborated by independent evidence from Assyrian records.

“The Assyrians, as a policy, resettled deportees from other parts of their empire—as they sent the Israelites to other areas—in the northern territories to break the bonds of the people to their ancestral lands and make them more docile, easier to assimilate, and therefore, to control. It was also necessary to have inhabitants farming the vacated land and producing goods for trade within the empire, which can’t really be

done if everyone was banished, and so Tigger moved in some new residents to tend the land. This is one explanation for the strict prohibitions in the Bible cautioning the Jews not to intermarry with foreigners, as the new settlers would have been from other conquered lands that brought their own strange gods with them. This situation was inherently threatening because it could lead the people of Judah away from their obedience to the House of David and their control over the minds of the people—or more accurately, their monopoly on worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.

“The biblical version of their pretend cousins from the ten northern tribes vanishing from history corresponds to this historical deportation of the Israelites and their assimilation into other cultures within the Assyrian Empire. However, the biblical story as it was written by surviving Judah to further their own propaganda, unfairly painted the Israelites in a wickedly pagan light, claiming that it was their idolatry that brought God’s wrath down upon them—but spared virtuous and noble Judah. This transparent attempt at puffing up the ego of second-rate Judah, whose inferiority complex was the motivating factor behind Josiah’s quest to acquire the lands of the more prosperous abandoned northern territory, was downright political slander.

“In 740 BCE, at the time when Assyria was conquering Israel, Judah clearly saw the writing on the wall and King Uzziah sued for peace, opting to become a vassal kingdom rather than face destruction. It was during this time that Judah made the great leap forward into established statehood and literacy. Membership within the empire of the current superpower had its privileges, and Judah profited hugely from participating in the Arabian camel caravans and trading networks. Judah had always been a poor, sparsely populated, illiterate backwater up to the point of the Assyrian threat of annihilation, and the benefits of becoming a vassal state propelled their culture into the modern age. In essence, they were the ‘*Bethely Hillbillies*’ of the first millennium BCE, striking olive oil and loading up the cart to move to the big city.

“In due time, you just know that eventually, the Assyrians got what was coming to them, as what goes around comes around. Pressure on their western borders from a strong, rising Egypt in 652 BCE, and in the east from the Medes and Babylonians in their own backyard, ultimately caused Assyria’s downfall from power by 612. Their withdrawal from Canaan left a power vacuum, which Josiah was eager to exploit for his own purposes, and it is within this context that the Bible was written. To quote from *The Bible Unearthed* again, ‘The path seemed open for a final fulfillment of Judahite ambitions. Finally it seemed possible for Judah to expand to the north, take over the territories of the vanquished northern kingdom in the highlands, centralize the Israelite cult and establish a great, Pan-Israelite state.’

“However, at the time Josiah was formulating his great national plans, Egypt was also attempting to reassert its power over Canaan—a region it had ruled as an Egyptian province centuries before—in order to control the trade routes along the coast. These two conflicting national aspirations sparked a power struggle between Judah and Egypt that required some creative propaganda.

“For those of you that doubt this claim, I will again cite a critical passage from *The Bible Unearthed*. ‘Embellishing and elaborating the stories contained in the first four books of the Torah, they wove together regional variations of the stories of the patriarchs, placing the adventures of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a world strangely reminiscent of the seventh century BCE and emphasizing the dominance of Judah over all Israel. They,’ Jeff emphasized the following phrase to lend weight to the sheer magnitude of the traditional and historical beliefs undone by this one statement, ‘*fashioned a great national epic of liberation for all the tribes of Israel, against a great and dominating pharaoh, whose realm was uncannily similar in its geographical details to that of Psammetichus,*’ who was the Egyptian pharaoh at the time Josiah was attempting to expand his kingdom,” Jeff concluded.

“This brings us full circle back to how we started this class with the story of Moses, who along with the twelve tribes of Israel, was supposedly enduring slavery in Egypt in the Exodus propaganda that was written to deliberately demonize an Egypt that was challenging Josiah for regional dominance. By crafting a powerful story of liberation from tyranny for the people of tiny Judah against the mighty Egyptians, Josiah and his scribes whipped up national pride and moved the people to action. ‘We beat them before, and by Jehovah’s beard, we can do it again.’”

“Oh, dear Lord,” Linda interjected, “you aren’t seriously about to disrespect one of the most deeply held beliefs and traditions of the Jewish people, are you? How can you possibly deny that the Israelite captivity and the Exodus never happened?” she asked in utter horror at such blatant sacrilege.

“Easy, watch me. First, consider that Egypt was at the height of its power in the New Kingdom era, circa 1550 to 1050 BCE; though it should be noted they had begun to decline in power around 1150 after Ramesses III strained the empire’s resources fighting the Sea Peoples. The Egyptians were notorious for

writing things down, and there is no evidence whatsoever in their records of a Hebrew captivity or an Exodus; not surprising since the Israelites didn't yet exist as a political or cultural entity. Also, if the Israelites had been in Egypt, if they had been freed and a great number of people were trekking across the desert to Canaan, there would have been some written record and archaeological evidence. And, surprise, there is not *one* shred of evidence in support of the Egyptian captivity or an Exodus.

"Second, the biblical chronology for the Exodus, given in 1 Kings 6:1, lists a date of four hundred eighty years before the building of Solomon's Temple, which would place the end of their captivity around 1450 BCE. At the risk of repeating myself, the Israelites were not yet a distinct people at that time. Further, the Bible gives a *different* date in Genesis 47:11 and Exodus 1:11, referencing Ramesses II who ruled in the 1200s. The contradictory timings—something evangelicals blindly claim do *not* exist in the Bible—lend more weight to dispute the validity of the tale in its entirety.

"Allow me to summarize by once again quoting the scholarly experts from *The Bible Unearthed*, most especially in this case because it comes from an Israeli archaeologist.

But can it be just a coincidence that the geographical and ethnic details of both the patriarchal origin stories and the Exodus liberation story bear the hallmarks of having been composed in seventh century BCE? . . .

. . . The ambitions of mighty Egypt to expand its empire and of tiny Judah to annex territories of the former kingdom of Israel and establish its independence were therefore in direct conflict. Egypt of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, with its imperial aspirations, stood in the way of the fulfillment of Josiah's dreams. Images and memories from the past now became the ammunition in a national test of will between the children of Israel and the pharaoh and his charioteers.

We can thus see the composition of the Exodus narrative from a striking new perspective. Just as the written form of the patriarchal narratives wove together the scattered traditions of origins in the service of a seventh century national revival in Judah, the fully elaborated story of conflict with Egypt—of the great power of the God of Israel and his miraculous rescue of his people—served an even more immediate political and military end. The great saga of a new beginning and a second chance must have resonated in the consciousness of the seventh century's readers, reminding them of their own difficulties and giving them hope for the future. . . .

. . . Now a young leader of Judah was prepared to confront the great pharaoh, and ancient traditions from many different sources were crafted into a single sweeping epic that bolstered Josiah's political aims.

New layers would be added to the Exodus story in subsequent centuries—during the exile in Babylonia and beyond. But we can now see how the astonishing composition came together under the pressure of a growing conflict with Egypt in the seventh century BCE. The saga of Israel's Exodus from Egypt is neither historical truth nor literary fiction. It is a powerful expression of memory and hope born in a world in the midst of change. The confrontation between Moses and pharaoh mirrored the momentous confrontation between the young King Josiah and the newly crowned Pharaoh Necho.

"Therefore, the Exodus story was not a real historical event, but a politically motivated tool to unify the people behind King Josiah in his attempts to vilify the contemporary Egyptians who were threatening to take control of Canaan again. Further backing up the complete lack of historicity of the Exodus, is the Israel Museum itself and its 2016 exhibit which was nothing but a vacant space. As the Israeli newspaper, [Haaretz](#), reported: 'The hall devoted to the best known part of the story—the Exodus from Egypt—is an empty room with exactly one exhibit on display: a movie featuring co-curator and Israel Museum Egyptologist Dr. Daphna Ben-Tor, who explains that the hall is empty because there is no archaeological evidence whatsoever to support the biblical tale.'

"So, if there wasn't an Exodus then there also couldn't have been a conquest of Canaan, which, not surprisingly, is also backed up by archaeological and written records of the time. Additionally, given that Canaan was an Egyptian province at the time of the supposed Exodus, it is unlikely the Egyptian garrisons would have welcomed the fleeing refugees and let them go on a rampage in a territory they controlled. There

is also a distinct lack of any written records from other regional powers listing Joshua and his armies crusading through Canaan and the disruption that would have caused. The conquest epic, like the other stories that precede it, is also full of anachronisms.”

“Can you give us an example of one of these anachronisms?” Mr. Hobbes prompted.

“I would be more than happy to oblige. One of the most well-known biblical stories is the legend of Joshua’s mythical attack on the Canaanite city of Jericho. I say mythical because archaeologists have proven, firstly, that Jericho was abandoned before the Late Bronze Age—a period from roughly 1550 to 1200 BCE—at which time, according to the Bible’s chronology, the Israelites supposedly laid siege to the city. Secondly, at that time in the city’s history, it didn’t have fortifications for Josh to huff and puff and blow the walls down. Jericho had fallen at the end of the Middle Bronze Age and had only been resettled in the Iron Age, a few hundred years before Josiah began his propaganda exercise. It was this continuity error that the biblical authors overlooked, perhaps taking for themselves the legends of Jericho’s earlier destruction, and used it in the story of their imaginary Canaanite conquest.”

A few moments passed as the students reflected on these stunning revelations. Finally, Linda asked sincerely, “What about the Jewish Passover celebration; how can this tradition be associated with an Exodus you say never happened when it is such an integral part of their faith?”

“That’s a very good question. Rabbi David Wolpe of the Sinai Temple in Los Angeles kicked up a firestorm during his Passover sermon in 2001 when he asserted that the historical accuracy of the Exodus story was questionable, which, by comparison, casts the validity of the Passover and Jewish traditional history into question. Not surprisingly, some devout Jews and Christians were outraged that he dared challenge their deeply held beliefs. However, he pointed out that the true power of the Exodus saga is its enduring inspirational message to maintain hope for freedom from oppression, something Jews have suffered throughout their long history. And *that*, Rabbi Wolpe stated, is the true moral of the Exodus story and not its historical accuracy.

“The spiritual messages of the Bible, to persevere in the face of adversity, are not undermined by the lack of historical accuracy contained in the respective tales. The two issues are completely separate, but fundamentalists with their literal interpretations, confuse the two and make it an issue by insisting that the historical validity of the Bible is vital to the truth of its message, which it’s not.

“Additionally, in his extremely insightful book *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Professor John J. Collins pointed out, ‘This celebration is found only in the Priestly source. Just as P [the priestly source] grounded the Sabbath in the creation story, so it grounds the Passover in the story of the exodus. The Passover was probably originally a rite of spring, practiced by shepherds. In early Israel it was a family festival. . . . The celebration was changed by the reform of King Josiah in 621 B.C.E. into a pilgrimage festival, to be celebrated at the central sanctuary [Jerusalem] and was combined with the Festival of Unleavened Bread.’”

“So, does that satisfy your question about the Passover, Linda?” Jeff asked.

“I guess so, but you still have to concede there is still a great deal of belief that the Exodus occurred.”

“Well, there is a related historical basis for a Canaanite presence in Egypt before the New Kingdom Period of the Ramesside kings; the Hyksos people of the Fifteenth Dynasty, during the Second Intermediate Period.”

“The who?” Mr. Hobbes queried.

“That is exactly the point. Who has ever heard of them other than a bunch of dusty archaeologists, absent-minded professors, or history buffs? Certainly, Christians in the twenty-first century and half a world away have never heard of them in their Sunday school classes. When was the last time you saw a Sunday school teacher who came to class armed with regional maps, a basic knowledge and understanding of ancient history, and who had an ability to explain the contextual nature of biblical passages rather than merely reciting verbatim out of the Bible?

“Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah. The Hyksos—a name derived from an Egyptian word meaning foreign ruler—are people generally considered to be of western Semitic origin from Canaan or Syria, who became rulers and administrators in Lower Egypt around the Nile Delta. But, they were never slaves. They were ultimately driven out of their Egyptian territories, an area that correlates with Goshen in the biblical tale of captivity, around 1550 BCE which is roughly in the neighborhood with the Exodus timeline. The historical records of this era provide another interesting parallel to the Exodus story, such as the Theban king from Upper Egypt, Ahmose, who used chariots for the first time in combat to expel the foreign invaders controlling Lower Egypt. The Hyksos were not the Israelites, but their story can’t be entirely dismissed,

either. Their legend could have remained in the collective memory of the Canaanites for centuries and quite likely influenced the later Exodus narrative with grains of historical fact.

“There is also an alternate theory, one that doesn’t have a lot of merit as a basis for the Exodus, but it is interesting in a historical context as it ties in with the origins of monotheism and the possible spread of this radically new concept. Akhenaten, a pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty during the 1300s BCE, was the first ruler in recorded history to enforce a monotheistic state religion on his subjects. You may not have heard of this guy, but I’d wager you’ve heard of his wife, Nefertiti, and his kid, Tutankhaten, who became better known as Tutankhamen, or King Tut. Akhenaten started life as Amenhotep IV but changed his name when he became devoted to one god, the solar deity Aten, and made the worship of a monotheistic sun cult mandatory. Now, you can imagine the locals weren’t too happy—as you wouldn’t be either if our national leader unilaterally decided what religion we all had to be—about giving up the pantheon of gods they could pray to for any number of desires, or for help in alleviating problems, in order to devote themselves to one insufficient and over-worked supernatural being.

“Given that Akhenaten and his monotheistic policy was not looked on too favorably by the people of Egypt, it’s not surprising that the cult of Aten was abandoned at his death and things returned to the old ways pretty fast; which is why Tut’s name would have been changed from honoring Aten back to the old god, Amen-Ra. Some scholars speculate—including Sigmund Freud who wrote a book on the subject, *Moses and Monotheism*—that the faithful practitioners of Aten’s cult, refusing to abandon their beliefs and possibly fearing religious persecution, fled Egypt and traveled to Canaan where their beliefs may have sparked the Israelite idea of monotheism. Interestingly, one theory surmises that Moses was the High Priest of Aten. It is this unlikely theory that attempts to link a historical religious leader who fled Egypt, like Moses, with a doctrine of monotheistic laws and who spread this belief system among the scattered tribes in Canaan. However, this is all mere hypothetical speculation and the theory isn’t backed up by any other evidence, but there could possibly be a legendary origin here that served as a basis for the later Hebrew sagas.”

“What evidence is there to back up all your wildly blasphemous claims?” scoffed Linda.

Mr. Hobbes, always interested in allowing his students to engage freely in discussions, allowed Jeff to have the floor for a few minutes longer as he illuminated the class with his explanations. “Jeff, these were your assertions, so now you better be able to back them up.”

“No problem. The evidence comes from the two hundred plus years that textual critics have been analyzing, researching, and compiling massive amounts of new evidence that sheds an astonishingly contradictory light on the Bible and many of its stories. Though, it is only in the last few decades that a consensus has started to emerge across the academic disciplines, between the textual analysis and the archaeological evidence. Let’s look at these issues one at a time. First, let us start with the textual analysis and then we will look at how the archaeological evidence has only recently confirmed what the textual scholars have been saying for generations.

“Scholars examining the text of the Bible, starting mainly in Germany in the nineteenth century, were raising doubts about the accuracy of many of the biblical accounts. These scholars, who come from a discipline known as textual criticism, started pulling the passages apart line by line. Their studies involved dissecting and analyzing these passages for any clues that would indicate common themes, authors, and editors, taking into consideration the context of the times in which the information was recorded in order to understand what was happening in a region’s history at the time. For example, what were the political, social, or religious circumstances of the day, and what was the intended goal that the message was trying to communicate.

“Textual analysts also look at the specific words used, the style, and the content of the passages. They look to see if there are any key words in the text that reveal anything distinctive about a certain place and its exact moment in time. Or if those words and phrases can be used to provide a reliable timeframe relating it to other known historical records. Textual critics also look at who, or what, is being described and how—is it a positive or negative representation—an analysis which provides valuable insights into the mindset of the writers and gives a good indication of the motivations behind the text. These methods inevitably gave rise to a large number of problematic inconsistencies and revealed a drastically different interpretation for many of the Bible’s stories.

“An example of the textual examination of key words revealed that the confusing dual names for God, Elohim and Yahweh, can be directly tied to their roots in the individual kingdoms of Israel and Judah; El being the chief god of the old Canaanite pantheon in the north, while Yahweh was the name of the deity in

southern Judah. The textual scholars began to see a trend appearing during their analysis of the books, chapters, and verses: there is a distinct geographical focus to the respective passages that coincides with the references to God as either Elohim or Yahweh. For example, tales that self-servingly elevate the primacy of Judah over Israel are from the southern tradition, such as this passage from Genesis 49:8. ‘Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father’s children shall bow down before thee.’ In comparison, the northern tradition devoted to the god El gave us narratives like Genesis 35:1. ‘And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Beth-El, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.’

“Textual critics noted the significance of these kinds of references because this latter passage reflects the establishment of the Levite priesthood and their northern sacrificial altar at Beth-El. Such a creation would have been in direct competition with Judah’s Aaronid priesthood of the Jerusalem Temple, which came to be the sole place of worship in later tradition. The inclusion of the altar at Beth-El makes it hard to fathom why the original biblical scribes in Judah would have mentioned such a contradictory, opposing tradition unless they were forced to incorporate the widely known beliefs of the northern people of Israel into the historical traditions they were crafting.

“Through this examination of individual passages, the textual critics ultimately succeeded in extracting the northern Elohist and southern Yahwist texts—a descriptive label derived from the respective regional names for God—from the separate traditions that Josiah’s priests had merged together two thousand five hundred years before. This intensive research led to the Documentary Hypothesis, a premise that the Hebrew Bible is composed of several independent traditions. Linguistic analysis discovered that four different and very unique styles—the Deuteronomist and Priestly sources, in addition to the Elohist and Yahwist—appear throughout and were fused together to create the Torah, or the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Books of Moses.

“Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of Moses—originally a *lost* scroll that King Josiah and his minions just conveniently happened to *discover*—is completely different in tone and language to the first four books. Deuteronomy focuses on individual rights and responsibilities, and contains a strong condemnation of the pagan polytheistic worship that was still common in the region. It emphasized a renewed focus on the monotheistic cult of Yahweh with a centralization of sacrificial worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah; a city which had its importance overly inflated in this source. Deuteronomy has had a profound impact on Western Judeo-Christian civilization, probably more than any other religious book or tradition, with its radical ideological reforms and its focus on the civil rights of the individual, along with their moral responsibilities and duties to society.

“I would like to make a quick diversion and quote again from *The Bible Unearthed* on a specific aspect of Deuteronomy. ‘Scholars have pointed out that the literary form of the covenant between YHWH and the people of Israel in Deuteronomy is strikingly similar to that of early seventh-century Assyrian vassal treaties that outline the rights and obligations of a subject people to their sovereign.’ A rather unusual coincidence,” Jeff declared, “given that Judah had been a vassal kingdom in the Assyrian Empire up to the time immediately before Josiah’s reign.

“Additionally, ‘The connected historical narrative of the books that follow the Pentateuch,’ that’s the Greek term for the five books of Moses,” Jeff explained as he continued to read from *The Bible Unearthed*, “—Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings—is so closely related to Deuteronomy linguistically and theologically that it has come to be called by scholars since the middle of the 1940s the “Deuteronomistic History.””

“The Priestly passages are so-named, because they are overly concerned with Temple ritual and focus on the rising power and authority of the priesthood in the post-Babylonian exile era. They are sprinkled throughout the Hebrew Bible and mixed in among passages from the other three sources. The Priestly editors of the texts also continued to add further ideological changes over the next few hundred years, such as tying the Sabbath and Passover to the stories in Genesis and Exodus respectively, as Professor Collins pointed out.”

Recapping his original claim and concluding his summary of biblical textual criticism, Jeff read once again from his copy of *The Bible Unearthed*. ““In specific historical terms, we now know that the Bible’s epic saga first emerged as a response to the pressures, difficulties, challenges, and hopes faced by the people of the tiny kingdom of Judah in the decades before its destruction and by the even tinier Temple community in Jerusalem in the post-exilic period.’ Therefore, as I originally said, the Hebrew Bible did not originate

with the first five books of Moses sometime around 1400 BCE, but was compiled from various sources, over many generations, several hundred years later.”

“That was quite an interesting and informative perspective,” Mr. Hobbes praised. “Now, what about the archaeological evidence you mentioned?”

“It is indeed a very interesting perspective and one that more people should know about. And, I was just about to start in on the archaeologists and their findings. If you compare and contrast the textual critics with the early Holy Land archaeologists, you will discover that, until fairly recently, they seem to have been working in relative isolation from each other. The textual scholars have been cataloging the evolution of the biblical texts and the historical inconsistencies they contain for a couple of centuries, but many biblical archaeologists were not of the same open mind. Instead of looking objectively at their discoveries and making unbiased evaluations, many of these pious archaeologists were notorious for their ‘Bible in one hand and spade in the other’ approach, jumping to foregone conclusions based on what the Bible said they should be finding. Many of them assumed the basic historical validity of the Bible to be the alpha and omega authority, and this perspective tainted their investigations and clouded their judgment. Unfortunately, we now know from the textual analysis that a lot of the written histories in the Bible, the ones these archaeologists were using as their baseline, in many cases, were no more than legendary tales.

“These early pioneers of biblical archaeology tended to be so blinded by their faith that they were unable to divorce the evidence they were looking at from their religious indoctrination. They interpreted their findings through rose-colored glasses, viewing the events described in the Bible as accurate accounts, while trying to force the evidence from their discoveries to fit the biblical narratives. However, these attempts by the religiously motivated to use archaeology to prove the validity of biblical history ultimately ended up backfiring on them. The findings, more often than not, contradicted rather than reinforced the Bible and its tales—not that it stopped these people from reporting otherwise. But, the situation began to change dramatically in the past few decades as new teams, with new methodologies, started looking at early Iron Age settlements in the highlands of Israel, leading to radically new theories which challenged the traditional thinking about the accuracy of biblical epics.

“In *The Bible Unearthed* this situation was described as follows: ‘Until a few years ago, virtually all biblical archaeologists accepted the scriptural description of the sister states of Judah and Israel at face value. They portrayed Judah as a fully developed state as early as the time of Solomon and tried their best to produce archaeological proof of the building activities and effective regional administration of the early Judahite kings. Yet as we have shown, the supposed archaeological evidence of the united monarchy was no more than wishful thinking.’ Ongoing discoveries by modern Holy Land archaeologists, using unbiased methodologies, have since proven these earlier archaeologists skewed their interpretations of the finds to match their preconceived expectations. Their outdated views have now been discredited, with many sites being reclassified to match the historical reality and not the biblical version of events.

“Comparing the textual critics to these early Holy Land archaeologists—consider these two groups of scholars as biblical CSI’s, or Canaanite scene investigators—and immediately the vast differences in their approaches and subsequent interpretations become apparent, given the unscientific way the archaeologists were proceeding which led to a number of discrepancies showing up in later years.”

“Can you give us a specific example of where earlier archaeologists have made biblically biased, and ultimately incorrect, determinations of a site to prove your point?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“Sure, there are so many good examples to choose from, but first let me familiarize the class with the background situation by quoting a verse that caused a great deal of trouble,” Jeff said as he opened his Bible and flipped to the offending passage. “Here we are, 1 Kings 9:15, ‘And this is the reason of the levy which king Solomon raised; for to build the house of the Lord, and his own house, and Millo, and the wall of Jerusalem, and Hazor, and Megiddo, and Gezer.’ This verse is the root cause of the bias that clouded the judgment of so many archaeologists who went off in search of proof for Solomon’s epic building campaign—and then blindly ignored the facts they uncovered.

“When the various authors of the Bible were framing their political propaganda—sorry, Linda, you objected to that description earlier, perhaps a more accurate phrase is pious fiction—they created the mythical united monarchy of David and Solomon. This united monarchy then, according to legend, split into two kingdoms following Solomon’s death: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. It was this story—in conjunction with the patriarchal narratives—which Judah used as an excuse for brotherly reunification with Israel under the authority of Judah. The pro-Judah propaganda is blatantly clear in the books of 1 and 2 Kings, which, in essence, are mainly one long, monotonous diatribe against the kings of Israel that disparage

the lineage and rules of one king after another. The point of these negative stories, demonizing the wicked kings of the north, was blatantly prejudicial and, once again, served the interests of Josiah's ambition. This tactic had the unfortunate side effect of painting Yahweh in a constantly changing mood which needed to be justified with even more propaganda.

"Indeed, if God is supposedly omnipotent, why would he consistently install kings that surely he knew would turn to idolatry and violate his covenant? The writers seem to have missed this point, as time and again in their narratives God chooses a successor only to see that king lead the Israelites back to polytheistic worship—a practice the Israelites never wholly abandoned until after the Babylonian exile and the subsequent formation of Judaism into its lasting monotheistic incarnation. This is hardly a ringing endorsement for God's character assessment capabilities and interviewing skills in hiring the next leader of his chosen people. Though, I am sure the goal of merging all of these texts, and the not-so-subtle propaganda the biblical scribes came up with, was not to make their God sound so wishy-washy, contradictory, and incompetent, as he clearly seems to be in the varying biblical books that evolved over hundreds of years.

"The other thing I need to explain first is who the Omrides are, as their story is central to understanding the significance of why this particular verse had caused so much confusion. The most powerful ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel was Omri, who gave his name to the dynasty of his descendants, like Ahab and his famously disparaged wife, Jezebel. As the old saying goes, history is written by the winners, and the winners often paint their opponents in an excessively negative light. The politically slanderous accounts of the Omrides in the Hebrew Bible, as written by the scribes in Judah, are no different. As you may have already deduced, it is the Omrides that relate to the archaeological sites that were incorrectly attributed to Solomon based on this single biblical passage that Judah used in order to take credit for the monumental building campaigns.

"By misappropriating the achievements of the Omrides and attributing them to a fictional golden age united monarchy under David and Solomon, who conveniently ruled over the twelve tribes of Israel and Judah, Josiah added further to the family story in an attempt to legitimize his territorial ambitions. However, the archaeological evidence, overwhelmingly, does not back up the idealized history of David and Solomon that has come down through Judeo-Christian culture as accepted truth.

"At the time of the supposed united monarchy, around 1000 BCE, Judah was still relatively unpopulated with a mostly illiterate populace and didn't yet have the established civil administration that developed under the Assyrians. There is *no* evidence, either documentary or archaeological, to support the existence of a united monarchy at the turn of the millennium. So, how could David and Solomon have commanded such an empire as written in the biblical epics? Oh, that's right, they didn't. While there is evidence of a House of David, evidence that came from the Tel Dan stele discovered only in 1993 which mentions the dynasty, the exploits of these two as great empire builders are nothing more than highly embellished tales. The historical David was more likely a local tribal chieftain who overthrew the Jebusites, the existing rulers of the village of Jerusalem at the time, and established his own dynastic line which came to rule over Judah. Scribes in the late 600s, in conjunction with Josiah's massive propaganda efforts, exaggerated the local legends of David and Solomon and borrowed Omride splendor to concoct a story of a glorified national past under the leadership of Josiah's ruling family.

"Now, if you will indulge me and give me a few moments to go over the archaeological evidence that backs up this premise in the detail it deserves, I can cite a very specific example directly from *The Bible Unearthed*. Please bear with me while I jump around the pages a bit to combine some different sections to summarize and condense the information in a coherent manner:

Even though no trace of the Solomonic Temple and palace in Jerusalem has ever been identified, there have been many other places for scholars to look. The biblical narrative describes Solomon's rebuilding of the northern cities of Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer (1 Kings 9:15). When one of those sites—Megiddo—was excavated by an expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, some of its most impressive Iron Age remains were attributed to Solomon. . . .

. . . The members of the University of Chicago team were more interested in the glory of Solomon than in the wicked Omrides. They ignored the similarity of the Megiddo and Samaria building styles and dated the complexes of pillared buildings (presumably stables) in the succeeding stratum to the days of the united monarchy. In the early 1960s, when Yigael Yadin

of the Hebrew University came to Megiddo, he dated the Megiddo palaces—the one excavated in the 1920s and one he himself uncovered—to the time of Solomon and linked the later level containing the stables and other structures to the era of the Omrides. . . .

. . . The discoveries continued in the 1950s, after the establishment of the state of Israel, when Israeli archaeologists began to concentrate on the question of the conquest of the promised land. In 1956, the leading Israeli archaeologist, Yigael Yadin, initiated excavations at the ancient city of Hazor, described in the book of Joshua as “the head of all those kingdoms” (Joshua 11:10). It was an ideal testing ground for the archaeological search for the Israelite conquest. . . .

. . . Thus, for much of the twentieth century, archaeology seemed to confirm the Bible’s account. Unfortunately the scholarly consensus would eventually dissolve. . . .

. . . Yadin summed it up this way: “There is no example in the history of archaeology where a passage helped so much in identifying and dating structures in several of the most important tells in the Holy Land as has 1 Kings 9:15 . . . Our decision to attribute that layer [at Hazor] to Solomon was based primarily on the 1 Kings passage, the stratigraphy, and the pottery. But when in addition we found in that stratum a six-chambered, two-towered gate connected to a casemate wall identical in plan and measurement with the gate at Megiddo, we felt sure we had successfully identified Solomon’s city.” . . .

. . . What he found revolutionized biblical archaeology for a generation. . . . Yadin’s student David Ussishkin soon clinched the connection of these buildings to Solomon by demonstrating that the biblical description of the palace that Solomon built in Jerusalem perfectly fits the Megiddo palaces. . . .

. . . For Yadin and many others, archaeology seemed to fit the Bible more closely than ever. . . .

. . . For some years, Solomon’s gates symbolized archaeology’s most impressive support for the Bible. Yet basic questions of historical logic eventually undermined their significance. . . .

. . . It is clear, therefore, that the whole idea of the archaeology of the united monarchy, of the blueprint city planning of Solomon’s architects, and of the grandeur of the Solomonic palaces, rests on one verse in the Bible—1 Kings 9:15. We must repeat this again: the entire traditional reconstruction of the nature of the united monarchy of Israel—its territorial expansion, its material culture, its relationship with the neighboring countries—depends on the interpretation of a single biblical verse!

“So, there you go, a perfect example of how biblically blinded archaeologists warped their discoveries to fit the fictional narratives of their faith. They based their perspective on a single passage, written by scribes in Judah who sought to take credit for the accomplishments of an earlier, more powerful dynasty for their kingdom. And, it is only in the past few decades that steps have been taken to rectify this situation,” Jeff finally concluded.

“That’s all you’ve got to conclude that all of our Judeo-Christian beliefs are wrong?” Linda questioned, with an air of righteous superiority. “All you have cited are some textual and timeline inconsistencies in the archaeological record that don’t line up with the biblical accounts. Do you think that is enough to convince the faithful that our underlying belief in God should be tossed out like the baby with the bathwater?”

“Well, there is a general consensus among scholars that the information I have given this morning is the correct historical interpretation. And if they concur, then who are we to say otherwise? I’ll take their word for it, especially over the opinion of some biased theologian with a vested interest in preserving his job security. And, as you said, if the errors in the story don’t undermine the basic belief in God and his goodness, then how do you explain the bloodthirsty tales of genocide in the Canaanite conquest? Such brutal, indiscriminate killing is hardly in keeping with the noble and loving deity to whom you, with blind faith, pledge your life and every waking thought.”

“Whatever,” Linda huffed dismissively. “Just because you say there were political motivations behind the creation of the biblical texts, that still doesn’t prove the religious beliefs which inspired the Bible are wrong,” Linda continued to challenge.

“Yet, it does prove the writers got many of their facts wrong. Either they willingly and knowingly falsified the stories, selecting bits to suit their purposes, or they unintentionally repeated the legends of their

ancestral tales, but it still makes them wrong one way or the other. Don't forget that the false Canaanite conquest legend is central to the Jewish foundation mythology and their claims to have a God-given right to the land of Israel. These anachronistic mistakes have played a major role in your religious beliefs and they are especially significant in relation to the modern-day troubles between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"Now, given that much of the foundational history of Israel in the Bible was written around 622 BCE, for very specific political purposes, and that so much of what is considered biblical fact is actually fiction, it probably wouldn't hurt to run down the other major imaginary biblical highlights. Let's work our way forward. In the beginning, scribes invented the creation story. Or more accurately, they borrowed it from surrounding cultures. Considering that there are two conflicting creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, the first listing the order of creation over six days and the second set in the Garden of Eden, it is not surprising that there would be some discrepancies given the merging of the four separate sources into the Hebrew Bible that textual scholars have identified.

"Let's start with the fact that several aspects of the stories in the first two chapters were borrowed from ancient Egyptian creation mythology. We know that Egypt had been one of the dominant regional powers, and Canaan had been an Egyptian province, so it is highly probable that their culture and myths would have in some way influenced the ancient Israelite legends. Setting aside all the other proof I've mentioned about the late writing of the Bible, assuming as tradition holds that Moses wrote the first five books and he was educated in Egypt, wouldn't it make sense that Egyptian elements would creep into Hebrew legends? Though scholars know this theory is invalid for all the reasons I already brought up, it does offer a tenuous link to the literal believers who insist Moses wrote the first five books in the middle of the second millennium BCE."

"What evidence is there for this theory?" Mr. Hobbes inquired.

"To start, there is the ancient Egyptian belief of a single creator god. This god then materialized specific features of the universe in a certain order on certain days, which tracks rather suspiciously with the events described in Genesis 1. Adapting the Egyptian narrative with a pantheon of gods to the one Hebrew God was one way in which the story was tailored to the monotheistic Israelite audience and demythologized. Some scholars point out that the lesser gods—Osiris and Seth, also known as Set, with Seth killing Osiris—created in this earlier myth have striking parallels to the story of Cain and Abel. Seth also happens to be the name of Eve's third child; coincidence?

"There are also echoes in the Hebrew creation story from the Babylonian creation epic, the Enuma Elish, which was not discovered until 1849. Just as the Egyptian myth follows a certain order, so does the Babylonian myth in which specific things are created in a very specific sequence. Allow me to provide an example from Genesis 1:2, 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' Compare that with the Enuma Elish which also begins with a watery chaos and divine elements. On day one both stories create light; on day two, the firmaments; on day three, land; and you get the idea, so I won't bore you with the whole list. Suffice it to say, the trend continues with both Marduk, the Babylonian creator god, and the Hebrew God resting after their work is done on the sixth day. Question though, why would a god be tired and only capable of doing a few things each day? Never mind. Let's move on. Interestingly, in yet another disturbingly plagiaristic coincidence, both myths state the creation of light happens on the first day and the stars in the heavens don't appear until day four. Odd, given that our sun and source of light is a star and both stories make the same mistake in exactly the same order. Oops."

"Why do you say oops? Didn't you just tell us the creation story was ripped off from the Egyptians, now you are saying it came from the Babylonians? Make up your mind," Linda stormed.

"I also told you the Bible is an amalgamation from four different sources, all written at different times. There are two separate creation stories in Genesis chapters one and two that don't sync up, so what do you think the odds are that one could possibly have Egyptian and the other Babylonian origins? Don't forget, Canaan had been an Egyptian province and the Israelites were later vassals of Assyria for generations, not to mention the exile in Babylon. In both cases, there would have been contact with Egyptian and Sumerian cultures and their respective legends. These legends could easily have been absorbed into Hebrew folklore, with bits borrowed from each, and incorporated into the Israelite epic; syncretism being the scholarly term for this process."

Unwilling to let it go, Linda pressed on. "Fine, but who says the Babylonians and Egyptians didn't steal their creation stories from the Israelites?"

“Egyptian and Sumerian civilizations are both *vastly* older than Israelite society for one reason. Further, there is no archaeological evidence of a literate Israelite society until the first millennium BCE and the *Enuma Elish* is dated to the second millennium. And, because the Genesis 1 account is generally attributed to the Priestly source in the period *after* the Babylonian exile, which lasted from roughly 598 to 538 BCE. So, you do the math.

“I find it mind-boggling that fundamentalists, in spite of all the scholarly research about the origins of the creation story and the overwhelming scientific evidence about the origins of the universe, insist on the ludicrous notion of a literal interpretation of this creation narrative. Even more insane is this zealous desire to inflict such ridiculous beliefs on others in a science class. For god’s sake,” Jeff said ironically, “the creation story was a symbolic literary narrative. It was meant to help primitive human minds try and understand a very difficult concept, one beyond their limited comprehension of the world around them. It was not meant to be taken as a realistic account of the beginning of time and space.”

“But . . .” Linda’s train of thought stalled in the station before she could muster a lame reply.

Jeff cut in before she could get going again. “Linda, may I ask to which church and brand of evangelical theology do you subscribe?”

“My family and I attend Calvin-Knox-Wesley Presbyterian Church.”

“Excellent, I was hoping you would say that you belonged to a Calvinist denomination, but I didn’t know you went to ‘The John.’”

“The what?”

“You didn’t know your church is nicknamed ‘The John?’ As in Calvin, Knox, and Wesley were all named John, and as in ‘going to the John to drop a load.’ Never mind. Let us get back to my point, as there really is nothing quite like using your own prominent founder’s words against you. Here’s a little blast from the past, straight from the mouth of John Calvin himself. Do you know how Calvin described all of creation and the manner in which God expresses himself to humanity?”

“I have no idea.”

“Why am I not surprised? Anyway, the eminent theologian implied God used baby talk, as he [wrote](#) in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: ‘For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height.’

“According to Calvin’s interpretation, if God was to reveal the grandeur of the universe to our intellectually inferior minds, then he obviously needed to dumb the story down. Framing the creation story in this way ensured we didn’t miss the point of his awesome power, so that even the most simple-minded of his children—present company excluded, of course—could find their way to him.

“Even Calvin said the creation story was never meant to be a literal interpretation—despite the futile attempts to make it so by the more fundamentalist of your evangelical brethren—but a symbolic meaning to help the flock understand the infinite glory of a creator deity. Ironically, modern-day fundamentalist conservatives completely overlook their own doctrinal roots by ignoring the words of the very man they name so many of their churches after and cast aside the founding tenets of their denomination in favor of a strict, literal interpretation. Fundamentalist Presbyterians refer to themselves as Calvinists, but if Calvin were alive today, he would be appalled at how the denominations that invoke his name have so completely skewed his theological interpretations. Especially since most Calvinist parishioners are totally ignorant of anything he ever said, and his ministers blatantly ignore his creationist interpretations in place of their own fundamentalist agendas.”

“Maybe Calvin was wrong.”

“That’s a pretty bold statement about one of the most influential thinkers of the Reformation, coming from a seventeen-year-old high school student whose extensive knowledge of the Bible comes entirely from what her hairstylist Sunday school teacher told her. But yeah, you’re probably right. Old Johnny had some pretty oddball ideas. He was convinced we are all predestined to be either saved or condemned and there is nothing we can do to change our fate. To Johnny’s warped mind, the millions of people living a good, Christian life made absolutely no difference. If God predestined you to be damned, well, so be it. Tough luck; thanks for playing and better luck next time. Oh, that’s right, Christians don’t believe in reincarnation. Well . . . too bad. This is the guy that formulated some of the doctrines of your churches, or more accurately, the doctrines you ignore in favor of your own contradictory fundamentalist notions. You sweetie, with a

body like that, you don't stand a chance by Calvin's reckoning. That's a body built for sin if ever there was one. It might be time to chisel off the chastity belt and enjoy your life while you still can."

An audible gasp radiated around the classroom and everyone's rapt attention was on Linda to see what her response would be. The young vixen at first turned bright red in embarrassment, then her color darkened into one of furious indignation. "My virtue will be given to my husband, and only to my husband, after we are married in the eyes of God, Mr. Pervert. I'll ask you not to speak to me that way again. I am a proper young lady and I won't have the likes of *you*," she said with particular disgust dripping off the last word, "sully my good name with your filthy mouth."

With a shrug and a less-than-sincere apology to her offended virtue, he went back to his argument about creationism. "Where was I? Oh yes, Calvin's take on baby talk analogies and the origins of the universe. Surely these childish creationist fables are not in keeping with the magnificent grandeur one would expect of the powerful and mysterious being you, the faithful, profess to believe in. As Richard Dawkins eloquently stated in *A Devil's Chaplain*, 'the Young Earth view is not just that it is false but that it is petty, small-minded, parochial, unimaginative, unpoetic and downright *boring* compared to the staggering, mind-expanding truth.' This creation myth, masquerading as fact, is totally nuts and it has absolutely no place in a science class; especially when the scientific explanations are so much more fascinating. I have no problem whatsoever discussing *all* religions in a comparative religions class, where each is discussed in context along with their associated creation myths, but creationism as a valid concept for the origin of life in a biology class, no frickin' way."

"Creationism should be taught in our schools, as God created our universe and he shouldn't be isolated or absent from our lives and confined to neat little boxes," protested Linda with total devotion.

"No, God shouldn't be in schools. As you frequently remind me, religion is an intensely personal matter and it belongs in church, or in the privacy of the home, and *only* there. It has no business being shoved down the throats of other people in the public arena. They are your personal beliefs, so keep them to yourself, thank you very much. But please, don't tell me and everyone else that your religious myths can and should be taught in public schools.

"Even Jewish scholars will tell you creationism is not meant to be taken literally. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* even stated that these narratives are an allegory, a symbolic tale to illustrate a point. I took the liberty of bookmarking the entry on their website so I could read it verbatim to the skeptics in class. To quote from an [interpretation](#) that developed in the years following the death in 1204 of the great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides: 'The fundamental proposition of these allegorists was then formulated, to the effect that all the narrative portions of Scripture, and especially those from the initial verse of Genesis down to Exodus 20:2, are not to be taken literally; "From Creation to Revelation all is parable;" and that even some of the legislative enactments are to be understood symbolically.'"

Jeff paused to let that little nugget sink into some of the thicker skulls before continuing:

Whenever the literature of a people has become an inseparable part of its intellectual possession, and the ancient and venerated letter of this literature is in the course of time no longer in consonance with more modern views, to enable the people to preserve their allegiance to the tradition it becomes necessary to make that tradition carry and contain the newer thought as well. Allegorism is thus in some sense an incipient phase of rationalism. . . . There being scarcely a people which underwent such powerful religious development and at the same time remained so fervently attached to its venerable traditions as the Jews, allegorism became of necessity a prominent feature in the history of their literature.

"So, there you have it, straight from the people that brought you the Bible in the first place. The creation narrative is just a story, and an overly simplistic one at that. A story specifically written in that way to help primitive and illiterate people understand the world around them; a story for simple humans who could not even begin to grasp the complexity of such a supernatural being capable of creating the vast wonders of the natural universe. It is pretty arrogant to think we mere mortals could possibly understand such a powerful entity and even more so to think he, she, or it, would have the slightest interest in the mundane details of each of our pathetic lives."

"God loves us!" Linda interjected angrily.

"You really think so? And where did that selfish concept come from?"

"We are created in his image and Jesus tells us we are all loved as his creations," Linda insisted devoutly.

“So, the fact that we feel alone in this big, vast, empty universe and struggle to survive, millennia after millennia, has nothing to do with the invention of the belief that we are loved by an invisible deity? A belief thought up to provide some internal psychological comfort, a cosmic teddy bear if you will. Have you ever stopped to wonder why humans feel so alone in this world and need to use religion as a placebo or a crutch to fill that void? Perhaps we should be addressing the deeper underlying issues of our existential insecurity and the root causes of human anxiety, instead. We should be treating the disease and not just concentrating on the symptoms by putting the bandage of religion over the open wounds of our damaged psyches.

“Frankly, this all begs the question, why do some people feel the need to derive strength from believing in something greater than themselves? Tens of millions of agnostics and atheists make it through their daily lives without needing to draw strength from artificial beliefs in the supernatural, so why do the faithful feel they need religion to do so? Have the courage to look inside yourselves, at your beliefs, and to be honest for once. If people didn’t sacrifice their human intellects on the altar of ancient superstitions, they might just be surprised to find they are stronger than they give themselves credit for. You may find that you don’t need false beliefs to feel happy and complete. That, without God, you can still be strong, moral, and that your integrity remains intact, despite what you previously believed. Also, it might surprise you to learn that each and every time one of you has prayed to God for strength, it was actually you, and you alone, that had the internal strength to get through those times. Yet, you externalize that strength to some imaginary entity and don’t give yourselves the credit for having the courage to make it through those times on your own.

“To speak quite frankly, religion feeds off the weak. It is a parasite suckling off the breast of basic human insecurity, providing a pacifier of false comfort during the long, dark, tea-time of the soul. Religion is a lingering vestige of primitive, superstitious minds, a shameful legacy bequeathed to the world by our ancestors.”

The class was absolutely thunderstruck at so direct an attack on their cherished and deeply held religious beliefs that no one was able to muster a reply. Jeff continued, “You also said you believe we are created in God’s image, but we humans project our own attributes into the divine realm in an attempt to try to relate ourselves to this imaginary invention. How else could we possibly conceptualize such a deity, except to give it human characteristics? Even if a god does exist, it would be so far beyond our limited human understanding that it is utterly pointless to try and comprehend its existence. Albert Einstein summed it up best when he stated, ‘I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings.’ Surely, your God must be greater than your scriptures make him out to be and he must have more important things to do than worry about our petty wants and desires.”

“You don’t believe in God at all?” Linda asked, with a look of shock on her face.

“Duh, I would have thought that was pretty obvious by now.”

“Wow, that’s a really sad and empty way to go through life. I feel sorry for you not having something greater than yourself to believe in.”

“Why should you feel sorry for me? What’s so lacking in your apparently dreary life that you need to make up imaginary friends to compensate for the emptiness, and that you project that neediness onto others?”

“I never said my life was dreary or that I am needy. Surely, there must be a reason for why we are here, a grand plan for the universe that is bigger than any one person and an answer to that age-old question, what is the meaning of life?”

“Sixty.”

“Excuse me?”

“The answer to the meaning of life . . . it’s sixty.”

“What the heck are you rambling on about?”

“The answer to the meaning of life, the universe and everything is sixty.”

“Mr. Hobbes, I think Jeff is having some kind of stroke, he seems to be babbling incoherently.”

“Linda, I am perfectly fine, but thanks for caring. There are sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour, we talk about our cars going from zero to sixty, and you can divide sixty by the consecutive numbers from one to six. Sixty is a unitary perfect number; all bow down and hail sixty!

“Also, in relation to this Old Testament class, the Hebrew Bible also uses the power of sixty in some of its stories. Isaac was sixty years old at the birth of Esau and Jacob. And from Song of Solomon 3:7, ‘Look! It is Solomon’s carriage, escorted by sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel.’ Sixty has a long and mystical history in numerology, from ancient times through to today, influencing how each of us relates to our day.”

“Yeah, you lost me. Sixty has nothing to do with believing in God.”

“Really, didn’t your God invent mathematics and use that mathematical order to design the universe you claim he created? Isn’t this exactly the kind of harmony and symmetry found in nature part of the creationist argument for *proof* of the existence of God?”

“Well, yes, I suppose so. Still, your view that there is nothing greater than us is rather ego-centric.”

“You don’t think *your* concept isn’t entirely egotistical; that an all-powerful deity loves you and that he cares about every insignificant aspect of your life? And, that he has not only the time, but the inclination and the willingness to compromise his preordained divine plan in order to answer your prayers? Hallooo, waiter, reality check, please! Sorry darling, but I am not buying what you’re selling. Why does there have to be a reason or a meaning to the universe, can’t life just plainly and simply be?”

“So, you think we are all just an accident of nature?”

“That’s not how evolution works, but we are a result of random mutations not a planned design, if that is what you are trying to imply by accident.”

“You don’t think believing in something greater than all of us would give you a reason to improve yourself, to strive to be a better person?”

“What, now religion is supposed to be a self-help seminar or a Masonic rite of passage? Can’t I just be a good and upstanding person who seeks to enlighten himself for his own reasons, without all the faith stuff?” Jeff then lapsed into a pop-culture reference from [*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*](#) to make a sarcastic point, much to the bewilderment of his classmates as he suddenly changed gears. “Not that I condone fascism, or any ism for that matter. Isms, in my opinion, are not good. A person should not believe in an ism, he should believe in himself. I quote John Lennon: I don’t believe in Beatles, I just believe in me.’ So, as Lennon said, I believe in myself without needing false premises to motivate me. After all, I am really the only person I can truly count on in this world.”

“You can count on Jesus.”

“Oh God, here we go again. Can we get off this topic, please? You sound like a retarded parrot. Let’s get back to the subject of our discussion, creationism in the classroom.”

“Why, so you can keep telling us how wrong we all are?”

“You *are* wrong.”

“Jesus, you’re such a smug, arrogant know-it-all. How dare you look down on my beliefs, and those of my fellow evangelicals, as wrong.”

“Right, because your lot never do that to non-believers, or to believers in other faiths, or have no sense of self-righteous superiority. We don’t have to look far to find examples of this behavior. One of our very own former members of the Kansas State Board of Education distributed a taxpayer-funded [newsletter](#) referring to evolution as an ‘age-old fairy tale’ that the scientific community attempts to push on the public with ‘anti-God contempt and arrogance.’ This woman went on to say that this observed scientific process is ‘biologically, genetically, mathematically, chemically, metaphysically wildly and utterly impossible.’ What makes this letter even harder to take is that she had no academic credentials with which to substantiate such a definitive dismissal of the disciplines she cited, given that the letter itself is such a shocking display of anti-intellectual arrogance. Paradoxically, she seemed totally oblivious to the delicious irony of calling evolution a fairy tale, while simultaneously and wholeheartedly insisting the biblical creation story is hard fact; or perhaps she was intending to be deliberately antagonistic. More frighteningly, she had a say in what Kansas students were taught, or more accurately, not taught by omission.

“I find it most amusing that staunch Christians insist on creationism being taught in schools as God’s truth for the origin of the universe, and yet in reality, what they are *really* lobbying hard for is to have ancient pagan legends forced into the impressionable minds of their precious children. So, I guess ultimately the last laugh is on them, since they are so adamant we be taught the creationist mythology of the Egyptians and Babylonians. The irony is just too hilarious.

“Oh, and whatever happened to that sad rhetoric your lot liked to chant before the secession, when the intelligent design crew was lobbying for ‘teaching the controversy’ in American classrooms? It’s rather selective of your brethren to only teach one specific view on the origins of the universe, one that suits their narrow Christian agenda, while at the same time deliberately ignoring the inconvenient controversy over the origins of the creationist myths. Why was the Enuma Elish never mentioned in the same discussion, or was that too controversial as it proves your creation story is pure fantasy?”

“You’re such an ass,” Linda vented, with uncontrolled indignation.

“I’d rather be thought of as an ass for being forthright in my quest for real truth, whether it’s painful to hear or not, than a hypocritical fraud and a naïve fool blinded by faith, who willingly shuts off their intellect at the drop of a hat when reason risks compromising one’s religious ideologies.

“But, I digress, as it is time to move on seeing as there is no logical way to convince you of the truth regarding the creation legend. Not that I will have any better luck with Noah and the flood. In this story, the biblical writers once again borrowed their ideas from Sumer where the Israelites had an influential source from which they could steal. Many ancient cultures have flood narratives that are all fairly similar, and in this case, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* served as the inspiration for the story of Noah.

“This ancient Sumerian story, preserved in the Akkadian language of Mesopotamia, is the oldest written epic on record and which is itself based on an even older Sumerian story known as the *Epic of Atra-hasis*. Though the number of days differs between the Hebrew and Sumerian versions, there are many other similarities with the biblical flood story. These include: a deity bent on destroying the world; the same deity ordering a man named Utnapishtim to build an ark with which to save the animals; specifying the dimensions of the ark; grounding on a mount; and the most striking direct parallel of all, releasing exactly the same birds, the raven and the dove, as described in the Genesis account. That is just too coincidental to be random chance—it screams of outright plagiarism.”

“There is evidence of the flood,” Linda challenged.

“Sure, there is evidence of several floods as the plains of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, as with the mighty Nile, flooded regularly. It would, therefore, not be unusual for epic tales of past catastrophic events to arise, as annual flooding was just a way of life and would have played a significant role in the lives of the people that lived there. In fact, Mesopotamia is the Greek word for ‘land between the rivers,’ an area known as the Cradle of Civilization, so it’s hardly surprising that a flood epic would have arisen in this region and spread through other surrounding cultures.”

“What about the fossils of sea creatures on top of mountains?”

“I thought your kind didn’t believe in fossils, as not enough time had passed in the biblical chronology for the age of the Earth?” Jeff taunted, before continuing with his explanation. “I see you are in need of some remedial science lessons. As the continental plates shifted over the geological ages, plains were submerged and sea floors folded into mountains, time and again, thrusting the bottom of the oceans up to become the tops of mountains and taking the fossils with them. They certainly didn’t get there in a monumental flood. Besides, the flood lasted only forty days, right? You think that’s enough time to deposit all the fossils we find? Not on your life, sister.”

“But, there are so many wide-ranging, ancient cultures that have flood stories. That proves the flood must have been worldwide. How else do you explain why so many different societies tell the same tale?” Linda persisted.

“That doesn’t prove anything at all. Since the entire known ancient world would have been whatever was within walking distance of the civilization in question—such as if downtown Ur was under water—then by their reckoning the entire planet must have been flooded. Given that the Near Eastern civilizations of the Fertile Crescent were all primitive societies living in relatively close proximity, trading with and conquering each other, it stands to reason that epic legends would have been swapped and retold, easily making their way into the collective memory of several regional societies.”

Linda scoffed at this explanation and blurted out, “You are just anti-religion and you will find any excuse to prove the faithful wrong. You need to find the Holy Spirit to help guide you to the truth. Noah existed and they found his Ark on Mount Ararat, but you won’t admit the Bible is right. The flood happened, so just deal with it.”

“And you are *deluge-sional*! If it really happened and Noah collected two animals of every species—again, surprisingly, they all just apparently happened to live within walking distance of his house—then how do you explain the worldwide distribution of animals or isolated species, like the kangaroo found only in Australia?”

“Uh . . . I’m not sure. Let me get back to you on that.”

“Yeah, you do that. You go check your Christian apologetics website and spew forth some lame, ridiculous, and entirely nonsensical justification. I can’t wait to hear this enchanted fabrication. Apologetics, that’s a good name. You guys should apologize for all the nonsense you force the rest of us to defend against, to the cost of millions of dollars in legal fees. You evangelicals and your stubborn stance on the Bible’s inerrancy! You’ve backed yourselves into a theological corner by insisting there can’t possibly be any mistakes and so now you are forced to think up complex workarounds to justify any explanations for the

silliness you believe. If you just accepted that Noah and the flood was a story, instead of a fact, you could save yourselves all this wasted time and effort, and move on.

“What if the story of *Hansel and Gretel* was one of the biblical narratives? Two lost souls saved by divine intervention from the forces of evil; it sounds like a very plausible story that would fit right in with other biblical parables. How is one fairy tale different from the other? Would this story be raised to the level of sacred status, immune to any sort of religious criticism? Would there be statues and prayers to these two revered saints? Would I be accused of insensitivity for daring to offend the religious beliefs of the pious for questioning the authenticity of this story, just because it was included in the Bible?”

“Yeah, probably,” Linda replied dismissively.

Jeff just stared at her, dumbfounded, before continuing, “Okay, what about the story of Jonah and the whale? That’s a pretty outlandish tale, so would you care to explain the reality of this to us from the fundamentalist perspective?”

“The Bible says fish, not whale.”

“Oh, well, excuse me. That clarification makes all the difference in the world. A man still survives several days inside the stomach of an aquatic species, against all reasonable expectations.”

“God can do anything; even protect a man inside a fish.”

“Right, you guys have a convenient excuse for all your foolish beliefs. Wouldn’t it simply be easier to say this is just a story and not a real event?”

“The Bible is God’s inspired word, literal and true, every bit of it.”

“There really is no getting through to you, is there? The programming is just too deep. Anyway, let’s keep going to the next major biblical story. Seeing as we already discussed Moses and the Exodus, I won’t go over it again. But, it would be careless of me if I didn’t cover one other very important topic tied directly to this subject, that of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai during the fictional wandering in the desert. One of the earliest preserved written legal codes comes from Hammurabi, a king of the First Babylonian Empire who reigned from 1792 to 1750 BCE. The Code of Hammurabi, along with other Near Eastern legal codes, was carved into a tablet just like another story we’re all familiar with. And, while it does not explicitly match the Ten Commandments, the two do share some of the rules in common and scholars consider it to be the precursor, in many ways, of Hebrew law.

“When the Ten Commandments were actually drafted is a matter of scholarly debate, considering the fact that there are three different versions. Starting with the primary list of Exodus 20 which we are all familiar with, they reappear in Exodus 34 as an almost completely different set after Moses destroys the tablets in anger, and they show up again in Deuteronomy 5. The list of ten that is intimately known throughout Judeo-Christian Western society is generally believed to come from the Priestly source, and there is debate within the ranks of scholars as to when exactly these priestly scribes existed. Generally, scholars attribute the Priestly source to the post-exile period under the Persians, but others think this source may be earlier, a contemporary of the Deuteronomist during the reign of Josiah. Whenever the Ten Commandments were drafted, in Josiah’s time of reforms after a century of Assyrian domination, or given the later exile in Babylon over a thousand years after Hammurabi, it is likely the Priestly writers would have been exposed to, or at least familiar with, these ancient Sumerian ideals and codes to draw upon as a reference.

“Oh, I almost forgot. There is one other convenient little parallel which I want to mention relating to the whole story of the Exodus—the Legend of Sargon. Hang on a second, I wrote this down in my notebook so I wouldn’t screw up the phrasing,” Jeff said, as he flipped the pages looking for the reference. “Ah, here it is. I’m paraphrasing from the original translation of course,” he said giving the requisite throat-clearing in preparation for his delivery. “‘My high priestess mother conceived me, in secret she bore me. She set me in a basket of bulrushes; with bitumen she sealed my lid. She cast me into the river which rose over me. The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. Akki, the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me.’

“Okay, I’ll give you three guesses where this little gem comes from. Linda, come on, I know you’re just dying to say it.”

“Babylon?”

“Ooooh, so close; nice try though. Sargon the Great was the first king of the Akkadian Empire, which predates the Neo-Babylonian Empire by almost two thousand years, but I’ll give you a bonus point because they were a Sumerian precursor to the first-millennium Babylonians. However, I’ll give you a second chance to redeem yourself, because I’m in a generous mood and I’m just that kind of guy. For the win, and a

trip for you and the entire family to glamorous downtown Kansas City, who does this legend remind you of?"

Fuming at the sarcasm and the impudent, little smirk on Jeff's face, Linda bit back her anger and murmured, "Moses."

"Ding ding ding ding ding . . . and the crowd goes wild, ladies and gentlemen. Not only has Linda guessed correctly, but she's also managed to admit an unpleasant truth that contradicts her precious indoctrination. Tell us, contestant, how do you feel right now?"

"Go to hell!" Linda blurted out, to the astonished gasp of her classmates before her Christian restraint could check her gut reaction.

"Oh my, that's not very polite language from our young, holier-than-thou schoolmate."

"Okay you two, that's enough," Mr. Hobbes interjected. "Keep it civil."

"Hey, it's not my fault the biblical writers borrowed so much of their material from older cultures in the surrounding areas and adapted bits and pieces to suit their purposes. I think it is safe to say that these guys would be publicly exposed as frauds in today's information age for plagiarizing so much material, but back then they were just scribes writing a great saga and who was going to fact-check them? What did it matter if they borrowed a bit here, a bit there, changed this around a bit, and dropped that? Lo and behold, the result was a whole new story, custom written for a new audience.

"This constitutes the evidence that disputes the historical accuracy of the first half of the Hebrew Bible. However, this isn't the end of the Hebrew narrative. On the contrary, it is only the beginning. The Hebrew Bible didn't coalesce into its final form until after the return of the exiles from the Babylonian captivity, starting around 538 BCE, when the Babylonians were defeated by the Persian Empire.

"It was during the Babylonian captivity where Judaism began to crystallize into its current incarnation among the exiles who had preserved their traditions from the threat of assimilation. The struggles of the faithful elite in exile led them to develop the attitude that they, and they alone, now had the sole and divine right to decide orthodoxy within the newly emerging form of Judaism. It is in the books of the Hebrew Bible written after the Babylonian captivity—those that come after the first five Mosaic books and the Deuteronomistic Histories of Joshua, Judges, the Samuels and Kings—that a fundamental change in the nature of the religion, its texts, and its characters began to take shape. This major theological evolution was due to the exposure of the Jewish exiles to Persian theology following their release at the hands of Cyrus the Great. It was while living under the Persians that the exiled population became exposed to the dual nature of Zoroastrian mythology."

"Dual nature?" Mr. Hobbes queried.

"Yes, as in the polar opposites of good and evil, or light and dark. The most important concept borrowed from Persia by the ancient Jewish exiles was the idea that evil originates from a wholly separate being, Ahriman, who is set in eternal opposition to Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian god of light. Before the exile, the Hebrew texts reflect that God bears the sole responsibility for everything in creation, including evil, which causes an awful lot of existential angst. After all, how do you reconcile the worship of a just and noble creator deity who brought pain and suffering into the world, and by default, is also the creator of evil?

"So, the concept of an opposing evil force was a handy little invention to circumvent the issue. It is only after this exposure to the Zoroastrian ideas of dual nature, of the divine battles between good and evil, when Judaism begins to evolve and build on the concept of Satan, the one who takes the blame off God for the presence of evil in the world. The Jewish scholars living in Persia, like Ezra, were heavily influenced by this mythology and those that returned to Judah brought these ideas with them. Though, a significant number of Persian Jews stayed behind in their newly adopted homeland until the modern-day."

"Persian Jews, whoever heard of such a silly thing? Everyone knows Iran is a hardline Islamic republic," Linda pontificated.

"There you go again, demonstrating your ignorance of just about every topic. Jews have been living in Iran for over two thousand years and they have, or had before the 1979 revolution, comprised one of the largest Jewish populations in the world outside Israel."

"How was I supposed to know that?" she pouted.

"Fair enough, it isn't widely known and I'm sure you've had more pressing matters commanding your attention."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. The Hebrew texts underwent further redaction in the post-exile era, that's a fancy term for editing and revision used by scholars to refer to men like Ezra, who is generally thought to be the last

redactor of the Hebrew Bible. These Priestly editors, along with the additions of later books, and ‘rulings by Ezra and Nehemiah in Jerusalem in the fifth century BCE laid the foundations for Second Temple Judaism in the establishment of clear boundaries between the Jewish people and their neighbors and in the strict enforcement of Deuteronomic Law. Their efforts—and the efforts of other Judean priests and scribes which took place over the one hundred and fifty years of exile, suffering, soul-searching, and political rehabilitation—led to the birth of the Hebrew Bible in its substantially final form,” Jeff concluded with a final reading from his copy of *The Bible Unearthed*.

“However, given the number of errors, repeats, and contradictions throughout the combined work, obviously neither the redactors nor subsequent reviewers did a stellar job of editing out the inconsistencies. You’d think surely one of the redactors would have spotted the dual and conflicting creation stories in Genesis chapters one and two, the three sets of Ten Commandments, and other assorted mistakes, and edited them out at some point in the early history. Ah well, the Bible is what it is, for better or worse. You take the good with the bad, the rigid and absurd laws along with the moral rights and responsibilities, and here we are two and a half thousand years later still arguing and debating. At least we can say life with religion is never dull.

“Next, we get to one of the biggest theological evolutions in Judaism. Early Israelites did not believe in an afterlife, one for the righteous with God in heaven, or banishment from the divine presence for the wicked. The people simply ceased to exist, or they later thought that everyone, good and bad together, ended up in sheol, the netherworld limbo of Judaism.

“In the Second Temple Era, how the post-exile time was known after the reconstruction of Solomon’s destroyed altar, adoption of a belief in the afterlife developed almost four hundred years after their return from the Babylonian exile. Sheol was an evolving concept, as Jews were forced to confront the gap between their political situation—living for centuries under foreign rule—and what their scriptures told them about being the elect of God, the chosen people. Post-exile thinkers began to speculate that, what precious little hoped-for messianic expectations there actually were, the messianic kingdom would not occur in the earthly realm but in the next life once we shuffle off this mortal coil. If the rewards for a just and devout life were to come in the spiritual plane, and mythology said everyone ended up in sheol, then the dilemma arose of how to sift the good from the bad. Surely, the wicked that violated God’s commandments should be punished in some way. Naturally, the righteous would go to heaven where they could dwell in eternal peace with God, but where were they going to put all those naughty sinners? The concept of sheol as a shadowy void for departed souls already existed, and so the belief evolved that fiendish scoundrels were to be consigned there rather than going to heaven.

“Tied to this dramatic shift in Jewish theology with a belief in an afterlife, is the book of Daniel. In fact, Daniel is the only book of the entire Hebrew scripture that has an apocalyptic genre, and it was the last book to be written that was included in the Jewish canon. It was written during the violence of a major crackdown on Judaism by the Seleucids, a Hellenistic dynasty founded by one of Alexander’s generals—like the one in Egypt under the Ptolemy’s—that governed the eastern half of the former Macedonian Empire from modern-day Syria. Around 167 BCE, the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, banned certain Jewish practices, like circumcision, that to the philosophically Hellenized mind seemed barbaric. Sophisticated and educated elite urban Jews were attracted to Greek philosophy and were eager to embrace contemporary modernity, but this shift away from the more traditional faith of the rural masses, and especially the challenge to the status quo of the Temple priesthood, threatened to annihilate the Jewish identity.

“The repression of Jewish practices ultimately led Judah Maccabee, a dynastic Temple priest, to revolt in order to save their culture, and this existential threat to their distinct society and religion is remembered every year when Jews celebrate Hanukkah. Or, as that dearly missed polemicist, Christopher Hitchens, wrote in a [Slate](#) article:

Thus, to celebrate Hanukkah is to celebrate not just the triumph of tribal Jewish backwardness but also the accidental birth of Judaism’s bastard child in the shape of Christianity. You might think that masochism could do no more. Except that it always can. Without the precedents of Orthodox Judaism and Roman Christianity, on which it is based and from which it is borrowed, there would be no Islam, either. Every Jew who honors the Hanukkah holiday because it gives his child an excuse to mingle the dreidel with the Christmas tree and the sleigh (neither of these absurd symbols having the least thing to do with Palestine two millenniums past) is celebrating the making of a series of rods for his own back. And this is not just a disaster for the Jews.

When the fanatics of Palestine won that victory, and when Judaism repudiated Athens for Jerusalem, the development of the whole of humanity was terribly retarded.

“It was the desperation traditional Jews felt during this time that fueled the book of Daniel’s ominous tone, but not before the book of Daniel fundamentally changed everything. These radically new beliefs in heaven, hell, the afterlife, and the associated psychological baggage those beliefs brought with them, had a profound impact on subsequent Western history; a change which still affects the hearts and minds of billions of people today, in all three of the monotheistic faiths.”

“How could one book have had such a dramatic impact?” Mr. Hobbes asked, ever the inquisitive intellectual.

“It had such a major impact because the author of Daniel crystallized the growing angst within the Jewish population about the continuation of their society. And, for the *first* and *only* time in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Daniel mentions the brand-new idea of resurrection. Let me provide the exact passage by reading from Daniel 12:1-2, ‘And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’

“As noted in *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, this is the only passage in the whole of Hebrew scripture that refers to individual resurrection, that it does not refer to a bodily resurrection, and implies for the very first time the righteous are lifted from sheol to heaven. From this point onwards, some Jewish sects started believing in an afterlife and a coming resurrection. These sects included the Pharisees, who focused their energy on a strict adherence to the Mosaic Law of the Torah, and who were the forerunners of Rabbinic Judaism; and the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scroll community, essentially ascetic monks who lived apart to maintain their ritual purity. Jesus, and later Christians, also picked up this very recent theological invention and incorporated it into their beliefs, as did the Muslims even later. Notably, the Sadducees—who were the Temple priests and dominant sect of the era—did not share these newly evolved beliefs. In *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Professor Collins stated:

The traditional hope in ancient Israel was for a long life and to see one’s children’s children. This hope was radically changed by the idea of resurrection to a glorious afterlife. The goal of life would henceforth be to become like the angels, so that one could live with them forever. This new hope is central to the apocalyptic literature. It figures prominently in the Dead Sea Scrolls and it was essential to the rise of Christianity. . . . Some Jews (e.g., the Sadducees) did not accept the idea of resurrection. Those who did believe in resurrection did not necessarily give up their old ideas about fulfillment on earth. But the idea of individual resurrection, which occurs in the Hebrew Bible for the first time in Daniel, introduced a kind of hope for the future that was radically new in the context of Jewish tradition, and that would have far-reaching consequences for the development of religion in the Western world.

“So, those are the basics of the Old Testament origins. To reiterate the main points and summarize, many of the most revered and traditional Jewish stories are not historical facts. Many were borrowed from, or are very similar to, older Near Eastern regional epics and there is a distinct pattern of Israelite writers incorporating these ancient myths, stories, and legends into their own culture. The fact that the details behind the stories were not necessarily accurate doesn’t change the inspirational meaning of those stories and what they were meant to accomplish for Jews.

“It is important that people should know about these interesting historical implications, such as the fact that the Exodus never really happened. Or, how these stories have been told, retold, and warped over time, along with other regional events that provide bits and pieces of history that were woven into the ancestral tales; like the Hyksos expulsion. Like many historical myths, there is often a grain of truth buried somewhere in the past that lent itself to the story. Whether the Hyksos were indeed the Israelite ancestors or not, their tale was likely known in Canaan and absorbed into the historical narrative, although skewed for the purposes of Israelite nationalism and propaganda.

“Collective memories fade over the generations, and centuries of myth and lore become intermingled with real events, especially in times before the local population attained literacy and written records. The patriarchal and Exodus narratives are examples of how nuggets of historical events, mixed with legends that blurred over time, can become distorted and artificial histories,” Jeff concluded.

“So, if you don’t believe in any of this stuff, why are you even here?” Linda asked, scornfully.

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I? We live in a theocratic republic and the state controls the schools and our curriculum, force-feeding their misguided beliefs onto the public. Believe me, once I graduate, I am fleeing this mental ward for someplace normal . . . like California,” Jeff concluded, paradoxically.

Mr. Hobbes, sensing the change in direction, jumped into the debate before it could continue and stated, “This is a good place to pause for a break, as the bell is going to ring any moment. Let’s continue the discussion in the next class when we return.”

Chapter 5:

I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.

Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*

New Testament Bible Studies Class . . .

“Settle down and take your seats, please. Your deeply profound existential teenage discussions can wait until after school,” Mr. Hobbes said, with a knowing twinkle in his eye as the students filed back into the classroom after the mid-morning break. “So, Jeff, would you care to continue where you left off?”

“Thanks, Mr. Hobbes, but I covered the Old Testament pretty thoroughly. This is the New Testament class so let’s move on to the Christian era and its beliefs, which have spawned some wildly divergent and contradictory doctrines that were never part of the original teachings of Jesus.”

“Here we go again,” chimed in Linda, sarcastically. “Pray tell, what beliefs do Christians hold that you are going to tell us are wrong, too?”

“Shall I start at the beginning and work my way forward again, deconstructing one bastardized belief upon another?”

“If you insist, carry on. I’m sure nothing I say or believe will stop you.”

“Okay then, thanks for your cooperation and understanding. Please sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride, but keep your seatbelts fastened because it is going to get a little rough at times. I will start with the Gospels, their differing accounts, and the historical mistakes they contain beginning with the birth of Jesus as described in Matthew and Luke.

“First though, let me take a moment to explain the differences between the four Gospels and how their individual accounts relate to the life of Jesus. The first three books are known as the Synoptic Gospels, Greek for ‘seen together,’ as much of the material in the first three parallel each other rather uniformly. Though, avid readers of the Gospels in our class will have noted the fact that the birth narrative was not included in the Gospel of Mark; or John for that matter. John stands apart from the synoptics, and for very good reasons, as many biblical scholars point out.

“In 1906, Albert Schweitzer fundamentally changed the course of New Testament scholarship with his book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, in which he documented a comprehensive summary of the textual critics I mentioned in the Old Testament class, listing their flaws in logic and the huge breakthroughs; which I will get to as we progress in our discussion. Schweitzer’s groundbreaking insight was that Jesus could be properly understood only within the context of first-century CE Judaism, and that Jesus was convinced he was living in the end-times; a premise that has propelled critical studies of the New Testament for the past century. Schweitzer goes into exquisite detail on each of the Gospels, but his commentary on John is [enlightening](#):

[T]he life of Jesus can be construed either according to the Synoptists, or according to John, but that a Life of Jesus based on the four Gospels is a monstrosity. . . .

. . . The question is decided. The Gospel of John is inferior to the Synoptics as a historical source just in proportion as it is more strongly dominated than they by theological and apologetic interests. . . .

. . . What matters for the historical study of the Life of Jesus is simply that the Fourth Gospel should be ruled out. . . . The speeches, in spite of their apostolic authority, are unhistorical, and need not be taken into account in describing Jesus’ system of thought.

“Also, in his book *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*, the distinguished biblical scholar, Professor Geza Vermes, pointed out, ‘But with the exception of his account of the last days of Jesus, John’s narrative is more fiction than history when it is compared with the Synoptics. It is enough to look at his invented lengthy speeches, which are totally incompatible with the style and content of the preaching of Jesus preserved in the first three Gospels.’

“Scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel to be written, sometime around 65 to 70 CE during the time of the First Jewish-Roman War, thirty years after Jesus died. This time of major upheaval was seen by many apocalyptic Jews as a sure sign that the end-times were upon them. Mark didn’t include the birth narrative,

because he was likely writing at a time before the urban legends surrounding the growing status of Jesus as a divine entity had taken hold in the oral traditions within Christian communities. These legends were likely circulating by the time of Matthew—who was writing specifically to address issues in his community around 80 CE—given that the expected messianic age had failed to arrive after the destruction of the Temple by the Roman legions in 70 CE. Scholars also believe that Mark was one of the texts which Matthew used as a basis for his Gospel. Luke, writing even later, drew from both earlier works. Both Matthew and Luke added newer and more outlandish supernatural elements to their stories, as the legendary tales surrounding Jesus grew in response to the delayed arrival of the end-of-days, especially after all the disciples had died.

“Okay, so starting with the birth of Jesus in Matthew 2:1 it is written, ‘Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king.’ And from Luke 2:1-4, ‘And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem.’”

“What is the problem with that?” Linda asked. “Both passages describe Jesus being born in Bethlehem, so I don’t see how you can show us there is a difference.”

“There are several very distinct errors in their narratives, errors that scholars have debated for ages and which are quite problematic for the faithful who attempt to reconcile the differing accounts. As with the redactors of the Hebrew Bible, you would think early Church fathers would have corrected the mistakes to synchronize the Gospels so that they do not contradict each other. Perhaps in their arrogance, they assumed the uneducated masses would never be literate, smart enough, or have the scholarly resources available to fit the historical references together and challenge these blatant oversights. Poor, illiterate peasants don’t challenge the authority of the Church, so if they were kept in the dark there was no point of going to the trouble of fixing the inconsistencies.”

“Stop critiquing and get on with it already,” Linda barked.

“If you insist, I will put you out of your misery. The first inconsistency comes from Matthew listing the birth during the time of Herod the Great and Luke citing the census of Quirinius.”

“Why is that a mistake?”

“Because anyone who knows their history, or has ever taken the time to open a book and read the facts, would tell you that Herod the Great died in 4 BCE and the census took place between 6 and 7 CE, that’s a difference of ten years and no small margin of error. Secondly, another glaring problem jumps out from the same lines of text for anyone knowledgeable in Roman history. While Syria was indeed a Roman province, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee were not provinces ruled directly by a governor before 6 CE, but client states ruled by Herod the Great and his sons. Judea and Syria were ruled by two very different people: Judea by a king of Edomite origin, and Syria by a Roman official; people who governed at two distinct points in time, and in different jurisdictions.

“Once again, modern people project current political and geographical concepts back in time and assume that ancient Israel was a single entity covering all of its current territory. Just like earlier this morning when I explained that Judah in the south, known as Judea by Roman times, and the former kingdom of Israel in the north where Galilee is located, were two very separate and distinct regions. But few people ever bother to look at a map or take the time to learn the ancient history of the region. What’s the point of going to all that trouble when people can just read the Bible for all the answers?”

“Quirinius conducted the regional census in 6 CE in Judea and Samaria—territories that one of Herod’s sons had controlled until Rome removed him for seriously mismanaging his kingdom—after they were joined with Idumea, the area corresponding to biblical Edom in the south. Only at this time did these territories become the newly created Roman province of Judaea, while Galilee, where Nazareth is, continued to be ruled independently as a client kingdom by another son, Herod Antipas.

“So why, if we follow Luke’s version, would Mary and Joseph be included in a Roman census when they were not Roman subjects? There are also no records whatsoever of an empire-wide census of Roman citizens, at any time, and there was never a requirement for people to return to their ancestral homes to be counted. Why does Luke mix everything up? Maybe he’s just completely wrong. Or, more likely, it was because he was writing so many years after the death of Jesus that he never had any first-hand knowledge. What did Luke do instead? He resorted to that old trick that pops up so often in biblical history, combining a dash of real, but distorted historical events in conjunction with local myths and legends to construct a narrative.”

“Okay, so say you’re right about Luke. What about Matthew’s account, can you discount his details?” inquired Mr. Hobbes, trying to further the discussion.

“No one can say for sure when the man Jesus was born, but scholars generally agree it would have been around the time, at or near the end, of Herod the Great’s reign. So, for the sake of argument, let’s give that point to Matthew.”

“So, you are admitting Jesus existed,” interrupted Linda, with a triumphant note in her voice.

“I’m not disputing a man with that name existed, whom the Romans crucified as was their custom. However, I do challenge the phony additions to his legend that have accrued over the centuries and altered the fundamental nature of his message, his ministry, and changed his very humanity into one of a divine nature; but I’ll get to that later. For now, I want to jump back to Matthew 2:5-6 to illustrate my next point. ‘And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.’

“Matthew was drawing from Micah 5:2, ‘But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.’ This passage alluded to the coming of a messianic warrior-king from Bethlehem, the traditional city of David’s birth. Matthew intentionally wrote his version of the story placing the birth in Bethlehem instead of Nazareth, in order to fulfill Micah’s prophecy. This ties back to what I was saying earlier, about how Josiah—of the Davidic dynasty—crafted the biblical history to highlight the supremacy of Judah, with only his family as the legitimate rulers of a pan-Israelite nation, as the messianic theme is intimately tied to David’s descendants.

“Luke followed the same pattern, as it would have been well-known that Jesus came from Nazareth. To explain this inconsistency, he added the elaborate census justification to get Mary to Bethlehem. By doing so, he was able to match both Matthew’s account and fulfill the prophecy about the messiah coming from the city of David’s birth.

“Unfortunately for Matthew who used Micah 5:2 to place the birth in Bethlehem, this passage refers to a very specific point in time and relates to very specific circumstances. If Matthew had bothered to keep reading a little further past verse two, he might have realized this passage was referring directly to an imminent Assyrian threat, not to a messiah sent to redeem the faithful several hundred years later. I am sure Matthew knew precisely what this prophecy was referring to, but he decided to use it anyway as a convenient reference in his arsenal of disinformation. Listen to this passage from Micah 5:5-6 and decide for yourselves: ‘And this man shall be the peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land: and when he shall tread in our palaces, then shall we raise against him seven shepherds, and eight principal men. And they shall waste the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod in the entrances thereof: thus shall he deliver us from the Assyrian, when he cometh into our land, and when he treadeth within our borders.’

“Another point of Matthew’s which can be disputed, is what is known as the Massacre of the Innocents from Matthew 2. In this narrative, Matthew writes that Joseph took the family and fled to safety in Egypt. The story claims that Herod ordered the killing of all the male children less than two years of age in an attempt to eliminate the ‘king of the Jews’ before Jesus could usurp the throne. There is no historical evidence of this event ever happening, either in the other Gospels, or in Roman or Judean records, as this story is purely fictional. Further, this narrative, shockingly, contradicts Luke 2:39 in which Joseph and the progeny didn’t go to Egypt, but returned to Nazareth. The contradictions never end, do they?

“There are two aspects to note in this account, the first being the obvious allusion to the story of Moses in Exodus 1 when the pharaoh commanded all male children to be killed. Professor E. P. Sanders noted the tendency of Matthew to portray Jesus in the light of Moses in *The Historical Figure of Jesus*:

Matthew saw Jesus as a second, superior Moses (as well as son of David), and he cast a good deal of his opening chapters in terms of the stories about Moses. The narrative of the flight into Egypt and the return reminds the reader of the history of Israel and the exodus from Egypt. . . . In Matthew 5, Jesus goes up on to a mountain (as did Moses when he received the law), and while there he comments on some of the ten commandments and other parts of Mosaic law. . . . All three synoptics say that Jesus was in the desert for forty days, partly to recall the sojourn of forty years in the desert at the time of Moses. These parallels with Moses make it all the more likely that Matthew derived elements of the birth narrative from stories about Moses. Luke, we note, did not agree with Matthew about the importance of Moses as a ‘type’, a precursor of Jesus. His birth narrative is focused only on David, and he emphasizes that the sayings that

Matthew puts in the Sermon on the Mount were said on a plain (Luke 6.17). In Luke, Jesus is not a second Moses.

“Second, in the style typical of Matthew, the author continues to *really* stretch the references and prophecies he selects from Hebrew scriptures, in this case quoting directly from Jeremiah 31:15 in his verse eighteen: ‘Thus saith the Lord; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.’ As with the reference to Micah, Jeremiah was referring to the Assyrians, as this was a common tactic of his, and which also played the starring role in the origin of the virgin birth.

“These mythological aspects, and others, which accrued around the legend of Jesus are fables in their entirety, given that the details of his life are such obvious forgeries.”

“What fables and forgeries?” Linda demanded to know, challenging Jeff’s blatant assertions of historical hanky-panky regarding her beloved Jesus.

“To start with, the whole virgin birth myth is a perfect example of how a calculated misappropriation of a Jewish prophecy was used to support the concept of the divinity of Jesus. And, it *all* stems from a *single* mistranslation of the Hebrew texts in the Greek Septuagint.”

“The whatchamacallit?” queried a visibly perplexed Linda.

“According to legend, King Ptolemy II of Egypt wanted a copy of every book in the known world for the collection in the great Library of Alexandria. So, he commissioned the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible which became the primary scripture for Hellenistic Jews; and later for the Gospel writers, especially Matthew and Luke.”

“What are Hellenistic Jews?” Linda asked.

“They are Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora, those who migrated out of Palestine and into the surrounding Mediterranean territories under Greek control following the conquests of Alexander the Great. Here’s an interesting little historical factoid: there was a virgin birth legend about Alexander, too. Just as there are several virgin legends in a wide-ranging array of ancient mythologies, so don’t think Christianity had a copyright on this particular idea.”

Mr. Hobbes chimed in, “Interesting, I didn’t know that about Alexander. However, I don’t understand the significance of the Hellenistic Jews. Can you explain how they fit into the picture?”

“Hellenistic Jews play a key role in the early history of Christianity and its spread beyond Judaea into the Roman Empire through apostles, like Paul—who was himself a Greek-speaking Jew from Anatolia, in modern-day Turkey—who ventured out to spread the good word to Diaspora Jews and pagan Gentiles. Given that Jesus was a devout Galilean Jew, preaching Jewish teachings to Jewish people—although with a new spin on the teachings—Jews would have understood his teachings within the context of their culture, law, and scriptures. Therefore, it makes sense that Hellenistic Jews in Greek-speaking regions would have been among some of the original converts.”

“Jesus was Jewish? That’s crazy! What are you talking about?” Linda challenged.

“Jesus Christ, you really are totally clueless!” Jeff blurted out, and then laughed at the irony of his choice of words. “The Romans, according to the biblical stories, nailed INRI above the cross, which stood for Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. So, if he wasn’t Jewish, what was he?”

“He was Christian, obviously,” Linda replied knowingly.

“I don’t know what to say to that,” Jeff said, baffled by this stunning level of stupidity. “Clearly, you don’t know the first thing about Christianity, or Jesus for that matter, beyond the simple basics of what you’ve been told in church. I honestly can’t even imagine where to begin explaining things to someone so utterly lacking in knowledge of even the most—I hesitate to use the word—fundamental aspects of her own religion. If you don’t even know that Jesus was Jewish, then sweetie, there really is a major disconnect in your understanding of Christian teachings and I don’t see any way of fixing an oversight of that magnitude. It does, however, perfectly illustrate my point that passionate believers, convinced of their faith but ignorant of the historical roots and basics of their own religion, are in possession of a very dangerous weapon. Or, as Alexander Pope so eloquently phrased it in his poem *An Essay on Criticism*, ‘A little learning is a dangerous thing.’

“Christians seem to conveniently forget that Jesus and his followers were Jewish, and that he was not preaching a new religion, merely a heightened sense of love and charity within the bounds of Judaism. Jewish scholars have attempted to point out the numerous Christian misinterpretations of Hebrew scriptures, but alas, their arguments seem to fall on deaf or stubborn ears. I suppose for the Christian faith today to acknowledge these ancient misinterpretations, and the path it led them down, would be theological suicide. I

guess it's better for religious authorities to simply pretend none of these early mistakes ever happened and just keep on trucking. Do you really think Jesus wasn't Jewish?"

"I don't think, I know—"

"I don't think you know, either," Jeff cut her off contemptuously. "I bet your parents have that bumper sticker—and I'm sure they also have the mandatory Jesus fish to go with it—that says, 'God said it, I believe it, that settles it.' The trouble is, you obviously don't know what was said. Your lack of biblical knowledge is so stunning, how could you possibly just know anything; let alone what Jesus supposedly said?"

"I know what my faith tells me to believe," Linda huffed.

"I can see there is no getting through to you, so I'm not going to bother trying. I will return to explaining the topic of discussion that led us down this futile path, that it was among the Hellenized Jewish communities outside Judaea that Christianity took hold. Ironically, had it not been for these satellite churches, Christianity would probably have died out as soon as it got started if the followers had stayed isolated in Judaea and Galilee. This heretical Jewish sect would have faded into obscurity and dissipated with the sands of time, as did the Jerusalem Church led by James and the original band of disciples.

"The influence of the Hellenistic Jews is quite evident. All the Gospels were written in Greek. They were all written within the Greek-speaking communities surrounding the Mediterranean, not in the homeland of Jesus, or in the Aramaic language of his original followers. They were all written more than twenty years after Paul began his ministry and founded early Christian branches in these Jewish communities, who was himself writing twenty years after the crucifixion. Therefore, this would imply that the primary source texts available to the Gospel writers was the Greek Septuagint of Diaspora Jews."

"What does all this have to do with the virgin birth being the result of the single mistranslation you mentioned?" Mr. Hobbes questioned, pursuing the line of thought.

"Because the translators of the Septuagint made some significant errors in their copy of the original Hebrew texts, including one very big one that Christians picked up and ran with. The particular error I am referring to comes from Isaiah 7:14, and Christian doctrine started to spin completely out of control when it was used by Matthew to justify the concept of a divine birth. The passage in question reads, 'Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.' The problem is the word used in the original Hebrew text is 'almah,' which means young woman, not virgin.

"This unfortunate and erroneous change in meaning had far-reaching consequences on world history. The impact on society was all the more unfortunate because this prophecy of Immanuel—that Matthew *knowingly* misused to manipulate his fictional tale—refers to Hezekiah, great-grandfather of . . . you guessed it, Josiah. Once again, this passage relates to the threat the kingdom of Judah faced from the Assyrians *way* back in the eighth century BCE.

"Given that the Isaiah 7:14 passage had been utterly and hopelessly misinterpreted, we ended up getting Matthew 1:23, 'Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.' The very fact that the author of Matthew used the Greek word for virgin, and not the Hebrew *almah*, tells us that he was writing in a Hellenistic Diaspora community familiar with the Greek Bible. Therefore, he was obviously not using the original Hebrew texts available in Judaea."

"What does that prove?" Linda snarled, keeping up her resistance to new information.

"It proves that not only was Matty separated from the time of Jesus by forty or fifty years, but the dude wasn't even living in the same zip code, let alone speaking the same language. And from this remote source, you Christians trust his account and take his word as gospel. Heaven help me! Have you never watched the legal affairs show *Amazing Grace* on JNN, *Jesus Network News*? Or *L.A. Lujah Law* on EBN, the *Evangelical Broadcasting Network*, starring Kirk Cameron as Thomas More, the devout defense attorney, the Lord's litigator, fighting to uphold Christian law every Sunday night at eight p.m. Eastern, seven Central? If you did, surely you would know that hearsay is inadmissible, and yet, Christians for two millennia have accepted this seventh-hand account, as testified by a foreign-speaking biased witness into evidence. Your honor, I object on the grounds of terminal stupidity, ask for the witness to be excused, his testimony stricken from the record, and move for an immediate dismissal."

"Overruled, counselor; move on," Mr. Hobbes decreed playing along.

"So much for an impartial judiciary," Jeff remarked. "Sadly, it was this virgin mistranslation of Isaiah 7:14—the one that was deceitfully used by Matthew and copied by Luke—that was responsible for the last two thousand years of mass insanity. A virgin myth which we know is one, physically impossible; and two,

the result of a bad translation from a much older Hebrew prophecy about someone else entirely. Where is there a wall for me to bang my head against repeatedly in existential exasperation at the staggering consequences this one passage has had on world history, and the sheer madness of its impact on the lives of countless billions over the past two thousand years?

“The virgin mythology eventually spawned the whole new branch of Mariology, the study and veneration of Mary, which was carried to extravagant lengths with bogus new concepts like the later addition of her perpetual virginity. If people had bothered to keep reading, they would get to Matthew 1:25 which stated, ‘And Joseph knew her not till she had brought forth her *firstborn* son: and he called his name Jesus.’ The reference to a firstborn son would indicate that Joe knew her in the biblical sense after Jesus was born. Subsequent references in the New Testament counter the concept of Mary’s continued and unblemished virtue after the make-believe virginal insemination, such as Mark 6:3, ‘Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’ And Paul specifically calls James the brother of Jesus in Galatians 1:19, ‘But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother,’ whom he identifies as the head of the Jerusalem Church in the next chapter, verse nine.

“Beyond the references in the New Testament to Mary’s additional children—which, of course, the Catholic Church conveniently ignores as these passages insolently contradict their stated policy on the everlasting chastity of Mary—the Jewish historian, Josephus, also explicitly noted that the apostle, James the Just, was known as the brother of Jesus. With a little creative interpretation of the wording in the offending passages to suit their needs, the Church merely assumes that James must have been a brother in the spiritual sense, and not a biological resident of the immaculate womb; problem solved.

“The whole train wreck of Mariology—which, sadly, consumed a disproportionate amount of the time and energy of many recent popes—starting with that single mistranslation from Isaiah, has gotten way out of hand. This is evident from the fact that Church elders started projecting virgin births back in time to include Mary, specifically the doctrine of her own Immaculate Conception to further justify the whole feeble foundation of the divine nature of Jesus.

“The Immaculate Conception doctrine got its start in the *Infancy Gospel of James*. This second- or third-century forged Gospel, self-proclaimed its authorship—and therefore, by default, the supposed credibility of the book—through James, the brother of Jesus. I say forged, because this make-believe prequel builds on the birth narratives found only in Matthew and Luke, which themselves were only written in the last quarter of the first century. Also, according to Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews*, James was executed in 62 CE by the High Priest of the Jewish Temple, so James could not have written it. Too bad, Jamie the Pretender, you lose. And so do all the faithful who believe this crap about Mary.”

“Maybe it’s not a forgery; maybe it was written by James before Matthew and Luke, and it wasn’t discovered until later,” Linda asserted.

“Then why are Paul, Mark, and John silent about the virgin birth? Especially John, since his is the Gospel with the most theologically infused material. You know, like Jesus was God, *in the beginning*.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, yet you’re pretty sure that you’re right and the New Testament scholars are wrong.”

“Regardless of the facts,” Mr. Hobbes interceded, somewhat ironically, as he jumped into the dispute, “billions of Catholics have believed devoutly in the Virgin Mary for two millennia.”

“Sure they believe it, because they were told to by the Church fathers. In 1854, Pope Pius IX, loathe to let irritating facts stand in his way, issued the Papal Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* which defined the Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception. It [stated](#) categorically, if not modestly, ‘We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.’ We said it, so now you better believe it . . . or else.

“The fun didn’t stop there, oh no. The Vatican just had to go to the opposite extreme, as well. In 1950, Pope Pius XII—you might remember him from such works as *Divino Afflante Spiritu*—invoking that convenient little tool of papal infallibility, issued an ex cathedra declaration, *Munificentissimus Deus*, that [proclaimed](#) the Assumption of Mary: ‘By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.’

“These handy ‘get out of hell free’ and ‘advance soul to nearest paradise’ cards neatly stitched up the pesky, loose strings of Mary’s invented virgin-princess life at the core of these bizarre Vatican doctrines. At least the Vatican got the assumption part right, because this declaration is a pretty huge leap of faith and one that came along rather late in our little game of making stuff up as we go along.

“The concept of the virgin birth was embellished and taken even further by Augustine as a convenient tool for Jesus to bypass his loopy doctrine of original sin. This doctrine became part of established orthodoxy within the Church four hundred years after Jesus, but it is not held by—and I love the poetic irony of this—the Eastern *Orthodox* Churches. Augustine used one verse from Paul’s letter to the Romans 5:12, ‘Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned,’ to fabricate his doctrine of original sin. It was then enforced by a Roman emperor, Honorius, and basically stated that we’re all screwed because of Adam and Eve’s sin, which all of us inherit through the sex act of our parents. Therefore, if there was no sinful insemination of Mary by Joseph, then Jesus is free of original sin and his legend gets added weight in the process of his ultimate deification.

“Augustine’s doctrine was challenged by other bishops, most vocally by a British monk and theologian, Pelagius. Augustine was forced to defend his foolish doctrine with bizarre rationalizations that left reason and basic human decency further and further behind, and in a series of letters he repeatedly made the claim that any babies who die before they are baptized are unfortunately destined for hell. Augustine most clearly articulated his cruel vision of unbaptized babies suffering ‘eternal death,’ in *On the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin*, [writing](#):

And so it happened that our anxiety about [Pelagius] was allayed to some extent by the following consideration, which rose almost to a proof, notwithstanding the fact of his unwillingness openly to confess that infants incur eternal death who depart this life without the sacrament of baptism. We argued: ‘If, as he seems to admit, eternal life can only accrue to them who have been baptized, it follows of course that they who die unbaptized incur everlasting death. This destiny, however, cannot by any means justly befall those who never in this life committed any sins of their own, unless on account of original sin.’

“Augustine was pressed into this idiotic rationalization in order to justify the ridiculous concepts he had formulated, because that is the kind of heartless and sadistic God the repressed clowns in the Church hierarchy envisioned in their demented minds—or at least as God was marketed by his scatter-brained public relations team after the product launch. Indeed, an Italian bishop, Julian of Eclanum, wrote a scathing indictment of Augustine and his God: ‘It would show a just and reasonable sense of propriety to treat you as beneath argument: you have come so far from religious feeling, from civilized standards, so far indeed from common sense, that you think your Lord capable of committing kinds of crime which are hardly found among barbarian tribes.’

“Lovely guy, don’t you think? I liked Augustine better when he was a hedonistic teacher of rhetoric, fornicating freely with his mistress before he converted to Christianity, flushed his reason down the toilet, and used his great talents, unfortunately for everyone that came after him, to become one of the most close-minded, dogmatic, and influential thinkers of Catholic doctrine.

“Once again, the spin doctors had to move into action and a whole new load of steaming manure had to be thought up to get around the unfortunate corner Augustine had backed the Church into. And so, some creative Catholic minds, one of them being Abelard in the twelfth century, insisted any unbaptized babies would not suffer nor receive punishment; an idea that eventually became absorbed into the invented concept of limbo around 1300, a place dreamt up to hold all these poor, innocent, suffering babies. Then, in April 2007, the Vatican released a [report](#) on this touchy subject entitled, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*, after several years of intense study and reflection by an entire committee of theologians—who, apparently, had nothing more important to do with their time. Their report, after all that time, money, and wasted energy, basically recanted Augustine’s assertion in the *hope* that God’s love will grant these babies salvation.

“Sam Harris, in his book *Letter to a Christian Nation*, addressed this very issue and asked pointedly, ‘How can any educated person think this is anything but a hilarious, terrifying, and unconscionable waste of time?’ Why is it theologians always take the hardest route? Why can’t they make it easy on themselves and simply admit that, maybe, whatever the moronic doctrine was in the first place was just plain wrong, rather than expending so much time and mental energy thinking up a ton of philosophical diarrhea to get around it? ‘We goofed, our bad, moving on.’ Maybe, then, the Vatican could spend all their time and money on real

issues, like caring for the poor, instead of wasting it on these ridiculous verbal gymnastics. Of course, the Catholic Church can't just admit that they have been wrong all this time without seriously undermining their credibility and authority, so they are forced to go through this whole ridiculous charade in a lame attempt to save face. This has the unfortunate side effect of making them look even more pathetic, pedantic, out of touch with reality, and increasingly irrelevant to the general public who watch with amused indifference at the lengths to which the Vatican will go in order to rationalize their doctrines.

"What is even sadder for all the needless suffering this doctrine caused for centuries, is that Augustine didn't even base his nonsense and twaddle on the correct translation; as historian Charles Freeman pointed out in *The Closing of the Western Mind*:

Augustine thought less critically about the scriptures, believing that they could be interpreted only in such a way as supported orthodoxy. Augustine's uncritical reliance on the inadequate Latin translations of the original Greek and Hebrew versions made things worse. For instance, he interpreted the Latin of verse 12 of chapter 5 of Paul's Epistle to the Romans to mean that all individuals sinned through Adam, hence to support the doctrine of an original sin, whereas if he had gone back to the original Greek he would have found that sin, which entered the world as a result of Adam's transgression, was a "cosmic" force burdening all humanity in general rather than being born uniquely in each individual. No wonder the concept of original sin never travelled to the Greek world.

"Did you pay attention to the point about the inadequate Latin translations of the Greek *and* the Hebrew? Oxford professor of ancient history, Robin Lane Fox, discussed this point in his book, *The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible*:

It is not, however, stated that what originated was sin or sinfulness, words which occur nowhere in the Hebrew text. It was St Augustine who ended by arguing that original sin had been transmitted to each of us through Adam, a view which he backed up by Paul's language in Romans 5. However, he followed a mistranslation of it, based only on a Latin version of the text. Paul's Greek had merely said that 'death passed upon all men, because [in that] all sinned.' Augustine followed an author who mistook it to say 'death passed upon all men because of Adam [in whom] all sinned.' Original sin was read unnecessarily into Genesis and was then forced on to Paul by a wrong translation of his writings.

"Anyway, enough talk about all these silly tales surrounding the virgin birth, and all the supplementary foolishness it has spawned. As Matthew and Luke did—except for a very brief instance in Luke when our tweener wandered off in the Temple and scared the bejesus out of his mum and dad—let us jump straight from the entirely fictionalized birth, over his awkward, pimply teen years, to the thirty-year-old man and his apocalyptic ministry where we catch up with Mark and John."

"Here we go again," muttered Linda under her breath.

"Yes, sadly, here we go again. As I have repeatedly tried to stress, putting the events described in the Bible into context is the key to truly understanding their real meanings. Without the background and context of the times Jesus lived in, the stories lose their proper intent and, as has become abundantly clear, subject to reinterpretation and fraudulent tampering by those with their own agendas."

Mr. Hobbes interjected, "What context do we need to place Jesus into to understand him properly?"

"By the time of his ministry, Judaea had actually become a Roman province—and the Jews didn't like that very much. At this time apocalyptic sects and preachers were popping up all over the place. Apocalypse being the Greek word for revealing or unveiling, not the final battle of Armageddon, as Christians have come to associate the word. These apocalyptic preachers were revealing that a messianic age was finally upon them and that God was about to deliver them, imminently, from the Romans."

"I don't think I like where this is going," Linda added.

"No, I don't think you will. Several books have been written by New Testament scholars in recent years, teasing out the true identity of the historical Jesus from all the background noise that sprang up around his legend in the first few hundred years. Not that devout Christians would ever bother to take the time to read them. That won't happen, because for the faithful all their answers are in the Bible and there is no need to look anywhere else.

"The scholarly consensus of Jesus that emerged in the past century, after placing Jesus back into the context of a first-century Jew as Schweitzer did, is that Jesus was *one of the many* apocalyptic preachers

common at the time. You know, just like those street corner preachers we see today with signs proclaiming, 'Repent! The end is nigh.' Or, the kind of guy with a compound and a bunch of devout followers who turned their backs on their families and gave up all their possessions to sit around listening to their leader tell them the world is about to end."

"You're nuts," Linda said. "Where would anyone get a crazy idea like that about Jesus? It's absurd."

"From reading the Bible, of course. And is this scholarly opinion of Jesus anymore absurd than believing he was born of a virgin, walked on water, turned water into wine, and rose from the dead?"

"Those were miracles demonstrating his divinity."

"Yeah, sure they were," Jeff replied dismissively, "and it couldn't possibly be the case that the much later Gospel writers didn't embellish their tales at all, not a bit, no ma'am."

"Nope," Linda answered matter-of-factly.

"So, where did all the beliefs about his divine nature come from?" Mr. Hobbes asked sincerely.

"Because people are basically stupid and will easily delude themselves into believing anything they are told."

The class erupted in pandemonium as tempers flew, feelings got hurt, and insults started flying at Jeff from all around the room. Mr. Hobbes moved quickly to restore order, chastising Jeff for his insensitivity and soothing the indignation of the righteous. "Jeff, maybe you would care to cite some examples, proof of these apocalyptic theories, rather than offhandedly dismissing the beliefs of an entire faith."

"I'd be glad to. Let's start with John the Baptist, who preached an apocalyptic message that the end was imminent. This was the reason why he was baptizing people in the Jordan River, because it was a way for Jews to ritually purify and cleanse their sins. John, like Jesus, was a good Jewish boy familiar with the Jewish custom of ritual immersion. His baptismal purification method was not something new to Christianity. John was simply preparing his Jewish followers for the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the Roman ass-kicking party that was coming soon to a desert nearby.

"The Gospel of Mark starts with Jesus coming to John the Baptist. The baptism story is cited in all four Gospels, but Paul is strangely silent on this first, crucial moment. Mark, like Matthew, also starts off quoting messianic prophecies from the Hebrew Bible, in this case from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. These two passages were blended together and then repeated in Mark 1:2-3: 'As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'

"As Matthew did later, Mark starts off reinterpreting prophetic passages from the Hebrew Bible and links these references to John the Baptist, of whom it was hinted that he was the messenger sent to prepare the way for Jesus. The real question is why would Jesus go to an ascetic, doomsday preacher for a baptism unless he already identified with John's message? Can anyone give me a reasonable explanation why Jesus would seek out John for ritual baptism, aside from the fact that he had with the same beliefs in the imminent arrival of the Kingdom?"

"Because the scriptures prophesied that John would precede Jesus," Linda stated.

"That belief is entirely wrong, as this so-called prophecy was merely an exercise in poetic license on the part of the author of Mark and the shenanigans of later editors. Let me explain how, as this creative editing stunt is not widely known to the general church-going public. Deviously, early Christian fathers—sneaky buggers that they were—rearranged the order of the books from the Hebrew Bible to make the Old Testament flow into the New for their new-and-improved Christianized versions. The Hebrew texts had been grouped according to content and style: the books of Mosaic Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, which neatly wrapped things up around 150 BCE; give or take a few decades. The Christian rearrangement of the books in the Old Testament shifted this continuity and altered the ending."

"What are you talking about?" Mr. Hobbes asked. "I never learned this during my theological studies."

"I'm not surprised, Mr. Hobbes, it was also a shock to me when I first heard about it. It's not like religious leaders spread this information around and make it common knowledge; if they even know it themselves, as many just assume the Christian Old Testament is the same as the Hebrew Bible. Not only did they rearrange the books, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches kept the deuterocanonical texts—or secondary canon—such as Tobit, Judith, the Maccabees, Wisdom, and Baruch that were included in the Septuagint, but were removed in the first millennium CE in the Masoretic, or current, version of the Hebrew Bible. These books, referred to by Protestants as apocryphal books, were removed from their versions of the Bible after the Reformation. Even within Christianity, the sectarian Bibles vary in their composition of books."

“Interesting, go on. You mentioned the flow from the Old to the New Testaments.”

“Yes, the arrangement of the original Hebrew books has been inverted in some cases and just plain shuffled around in others. Let me illustrate. What comes after 2 Kings in your Bible?”

“Hang on, let me check to make sure I don’t get this wrong,” Mr. Hobbes said, picking up his copy from the desk and opening it up to find the right page. “Here we go,” he said, as he flipped over the last page, “it seems 1 Chronicles follows 2 Kings.”

“Exactly, but in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Isaiah is next. Guess where 1 and 2 Chronicles are?”

“I haven’t got the faintest idea; I would have assumed before today that it followed the same sequence.”

“We all know what happens when we make assumptions, don’t we? However, you are not alone as this is the same assumption most Christians make about the relationship between the Christian and Jewish versions of the Hebrew texts. Would it surprise you to know that 1 and 2 Chronicles are, in fact, the very *last* two books in the Hebrew Bible? Yet, in the Christian version Chronicles is the first book following the Deuteronomistic Histories from Joshua to Kings. To continue the point of how the books were shuffled like a deck of cards, please, Mr. Hobbes, tell us what comes after 2 Chronicles?”

More flipping of pages and Mr. Hobbes answered shortly, “Ezra.”

“Correct; the Christian order of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther is completely reversed from the original Hebrew order of books, which is Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah and finally, Chronicles. The early Christian editors simply inverted the order of the last few books of the Hebrew Bible and stuck them in after 2 Kings in the Christian version. The reason for doing this appears to be for maintaining the chronological sequence. Chronicles retells many of the major stories from Samuel and Kings and ends, as does 2 Kings, with Cyrus the Great freeing the Jews.

“Ezra documents the lives of the exiles who had returned from Persia and their struggles to rebuild the Second Temple, and Esther’s story also concerns Persia. Ruth, a late book of Ketuvim, or Writings, gets plucked from near the end of the Hebrew order and placed after Judges with the Deuteronomistic Histories, as it takes place during the time of Judges and Ruth is claimed to be the great-grandmother of David. So, this ordering in the Christian Old Testament demonstrates some logical application to list the books in a chronological sequence.

“The books of the Latter Prophets, from Isaiah, Jeremiah—with Lamentations, thought to have been written by Jeremiah, placed after it—and Ezekiel, get moved towards the end and grouped with Daniel, which is widely considered to be the last book written, circa 167 BCE. It is only from Hosea to Malachi, the Minor Prophets, that these books retain their proper sequence and are placed at the end of the Old Testament, instead of in the middle as in the Hebrew Bible.

“By now I am sure you are all wondering what point I am trying to make about the flow and sequence of the books after citing this confusing and rambling list. Mr. Hobbes, if you would put us all out of our misery and please read 2 Chronicles 36:23, the very last verse and closing comments as they were intended by the compilers of the Masoretic Bible.”

“Okay, let me just find it. All right, verse twenty-three: ‘Thus sayeth Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.’ Okay, so what does that have to do with the ending of the Hebrew and the flow into the Christian Bibles?”

“What was the last line? ‘The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up’ . . . to Jerusalem. This was a nice way to end the story as the people return home and get on with their lives. And, do you know what the traditional Jewish saying is during Passover?” Jeff inquired.

“I believe it’s ‘next year in Jerusalem,’” Mr. Hobbes answered, proud of his worldliness.

“Right, and doesn’t that echo how the Hebrew Bible ends? Back to Jerusalem, the end. However, this tidy little ending proved to be a bit of a dilemma for the new Christians scribes, because they couldn’t write the sequel when the original neatly wrapped up the storyline with a big pink bow. So, how did they solve the problem? They simply rearranged the books to suit their needs, placing the Prophets last, as if these stories were forecasting the coming of Jesus. Essentially, what the Christian fathers who changed the order did was the ancient equivalent of our modern-day spin-doctoring.

“That’s a bit over-the-top, Jeff,” Mr. Hobbes chided gently.

“Maybe so, but the result is the same. After some strategic rearranging, we have the Christian Old Testament order of books that came down to us through the last two millennia. The shuffling of the books that moved Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles after the Deuteronomistic Histories to maintain a

chronological sequence seemed logical; as does the Hebrew order, in which the Prophets and the Writings follow the chronological order for the time of their composition, as these books were among the last books written and why they appear at the end. Moving the Prophets, which were all written centuries earlier than the Writings, to the end of the Old Testament broke that chronological order; which, is ironic from the perspective of striving to preserve a linear timeline, but, I assure you, it was done for a very specific reason.

"It is important to keep in mind that the modern meaning of prophecy is defined as forecasting future events, but the original implication of this word meant to interpret and make sense of the will of the gods for events that had already happened; as in, why did this happen to us, what did we do wrong to deserve punishment? This change in meaning is critical as it distorted later understandings of the Prophets by inferring a future meaning, rather than understanding them in the proper context as social commentaries on their existential circumstances at the time; that reality being the Jews were subjugated by a succession of foreign powers and looked to a restoration of their political freedom. Moving the Writings to the middle and shunting the Prophets to the end, allowed the early Christians to seamlessly merge the Old Testament with the New, and with the book of Malachi, presto!, a new ending. Mr. Hobbes, if you would be kind enough to please read the Christianized finale of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6."

"Just a second," Mr. Hobbes paused, as he searched for the appropriate passage. "Here we go, 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.'"

"That's a pretty neat trick. The ending goes from happily ever after in Jerusalem to the ominous return of Elijah and the looming end-of-days with the convenient repositioning of a few books that set the stage for the arrival of John the Baptist and Jesus."

"It is an interesting plot twist, that's for sure." Mr. Hobbes concurred. "It does shed a rather different light on things," he reflected honestly.

"Yes, it does indeed put a *very different* spin on the ending of the Old Testament, very much so. So, moving from Malachi into Matthew, from the Old to the New Testament, and skipping over the birth of Jesus to tie the two Testaments together, let's pick up again at Matthew 3:1-3, if you would please do us the honor one more time, Mr. Hobbes."

"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

"Thank you, Mr. Hobbes. Let me repeat Mark 1:2-3 in light of this new perspective. 'As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' This is an interesting choice of words, especially when this passage is compared with the Hebrew prophecies it was plagiarized from. Note the similarities in Malachi 3:1, the strategically realigned last book of the Christian Old Testament. 'Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in. Behold, he shall come, sayeth the Lord of hosts.' Isn't that a nice, smooth transition associating the return of Elijah and heralding the coming of the messiah with John the Baptist and his connection to Jesus?"

"Who says they don't foretell the coming of Jesus?" Linda asked.

"Because, as I've told you infinite times, these books were written in the context of a *very* specific time and place in response to whatever foreign power was oppressing them at that particular point in time. These books, and the passages they reference, do not belong in the order in which they occur in the Old Testament. They belong to a wholly different section of the Hebrew Bible and they were deliberately moved from their original contextual position to artificially backstop the legend of Jesus created in the Gospels.

"Tying all this information together, John was not Elijah, but he was baptizing followers in anticipation of the coming of a greater power to free the Jews from Roman rule and usher in the Kingdom of God. Whether it was to be the warrior-king of Jewish messianic legend, God himself, or one of his avenging angels, we will never know exactly who John thought it would be. It most certainly was *not* poor little Jesus from Galilee, no matter how the Gospels have been tweaked to make it sound that way."

"Why couldn't it have been Jesus that John was expecting?" Linda pleaded.

"Why wasn't it Jesus? Because the one doing the baptizing was supposedly holier than the person whose sins are being washed away, and if Jesus were truly God incarnated on Earth, Jesus would not be the inferior party seeking out John's cleansings.

“Nor were Jesus and John alone in preaching this message of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. As the Jewish historian Josephus also recorded, there were several apocalyptic preachers running around telling anybody who would listen to them that God would surely intercede on their behalf in the immediate future.”

Jeff selected another book on his tablet PC and continued, “As New Testament scholar, Professor Bart Ehrman, explained in his book *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*:

The historical events leading up to his time are significant for understanding his life because of their social and intellectual consequences, which affected the lives of all Palestinian Jews. For it was in response to the social, political, and religious crises of the Maccabean period that the Jewish “sects” of Jesus’ day (e.g., the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) were formed; and it was the Roman occupation that led to numerous nonviolent and violent uprisings during Jesus’ time, uprisings of Jews for whom any foreign domination of the Promised Land was both politically and religiously unacceptable. Moreover, it was the overall sense of inequity and the experience of suffering during these times that inspired the ideology of resistance known as “apocalypticism,” a worldview that was shared by a number of Jews in first-century Palestine.

It was during the rule of the Hasmoneans, and largely in reaction to it, that various Jewish sects emerged.

“The context of the times doesn’t prove Jesus was preaching an apocalyptic message like the others of his day,” Linda disputed.

“No, that in and of itself doesn’t prove it, but Jesus did associate with an openly apocalyptic preacher at the beginning of his ministry. However, a careful reading of the words attributed to Jesus in the New Testament does reveal his true apocalyptic message. Unfortunately for Christian believers, this message is *not* one purely of peace, love, tolerance, and inclusiveness that his later followers projected back onto him.”

“What do you mean by a careful reading?” Mr. Hobbes asked, genuinely interested. “Which passages are you referring to?”

“The passages I am referring to are the Kingdom of God references, such as Mark 1:14-15: ‘Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.’”

“So, what does that prove?” Linda demanded.

“The Kingdom being *at hand* was not just a passing metaphor for an event in the distant future, but something apocalyptic Jews and the early Christians expected at any moment. This belief is reinforced by Mark 9:1, ‘And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power.’ This belief in the arrival of the Kingdom is also echoed in the parallel passages of Matthew 16:28 and Luke 9:27.

“Allow me to quote Professor Vermes again, who adds further weight to the argument about the apocalyptic teachings of the historical Jesus.” Jeff proceeded to read, condensing the relevant highlighted passage written by the respected professor.

In sum, Mark 9:1 furnishes the clearest substantiation of the view that Jesus envisaged the coming of the Kingdom in his age, in the first century AD. . . .

. . . The general conclusion is that the Kingdom of God concept is solidly embedded in all the layers of the gospel tradition. It is at the heart of the message of Jesus. . . .

. . . The formulation attested by Mark (9:1) represents without any doubt the authentic saying of Jesus. For no one would invent, and no community would preserve, an announcement of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God which was patently not fulfilled. Indeed, by the end of the first century, it created a serious embarrassment for the primitive church.

“These beliefs are repeated again in Mark 13:30, and in Matthew 24:34 and Luke 21:32. ‘Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done.’ It is perfectly clear from the explicit statements of Jesus that he expects the coming of the Kingdom of God during his own life or within the lifetimes of his disciples. He did not believe this would happen in some far-off time yet to be determined, but imminently.”

Linda, excited that she was finally in her home territory due to her years of devoted Bible study classes, and feeling confident that she could dispute Jeff, piped up eagerly, “Ah, but if you keep reading you will see

it says at Mark 13:32, ‘But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.’ Jesus couldn’t have known when the Kingdom was coming, for only the Father knows, and that would explain why he got it wrong,” she said passionately.

“Uh, Linda, according to the Trinity doctrine—upon which you and your kind depend so heavily for your interpretations of the divinity of Jesus, at least as it was artificially formulated three hundred years after his death—aren’t the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost all supposed to be one entity? If Jesus was God from before time began, as it is written in John 1:1, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,’ and if Jesus and God are indivisible, then why didn’t junior know, hmmm? How do you explain a divine Jesus not knowing *and* getting the timing *totally* wrong? God is supposed to be all-knowing, after all.”

“I . . . uh . . . well, I’m not sure.”

“Yeah, exactly; you are not sure. On the one hand, we have the description in the Gospel of Mark, which was written about forty years after the death of Jesus that says he couldn’t know, versus a manufactured Trinity doctrine that came three hundred years later which says that Jesus and God are one and the same.” Jeff, in his best imitation of a southern accent, quoted that famous line from *Cool Hand Luke*, “‘What we’ve got here is . . . failure to communicate,’ with yet another one of those regrettable contradictions in the Bible, which you fundamentalists say don’t exist. Unfortunately for this particular major tenet of Christianity, Professor Ehrman noted in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet* that ‘the historical Jesus did not teach about his own divinity or pass on to his disciples the doctrines that later came to be embodied in the Nicene Creed. His concerns were those of a first-century Jewish apocalypticist. Jesus anticipated that the end of the age was coming within his own generation.’

“Given the fervent belief Jesus had for the imminent end of the world as he knew it, how then should his teachings be interpreted in light of this core message? Scholars believe that the charitable message for his followers to give away all their possessions to the poor was driven by the belief that having money or houses would be pointless if the Kingdom was due any day. It was this, his most enduring teaching, to love one another and be charitable to the less fortunate in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom, that is the message that later Christians have taken away from his doomsday prophecy. This message of love and charity, though a fine and noble one, has drowned out his clearly mistaken—and long-since forgotten—original apocalyptic ministry.

“Mark 12:29-34 sums up the core message of his ministry, the *real* one that related to preparing for God’s earthly arrival:

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God.

“Once again, Professor Vermes summed up the scholarly opinion nicely:

We are told that all the Law and the prophets have to say is contained in the two precepts of the love of God and of one’s neighbour, called the first and second commandments, or according to Luke just the one great commandment. The same idea is expressed in the non-biblical Golden Rule, familiar to the Jews from the Apocrypha to Hillel and the later rabbis, where all the laws of Moses and the prophets are reduced to a single one. In this way the religious and ethical message of Jesus appears as a vigorous summary of the most profound perception of Judaism.

“Matthew 25:31-45 is also a key passage that reinforces the real message in the teachings of Jesus:

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: . . . Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a

stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. . . . And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

“As Professor Ehrman noted, there is a distinct absence of any Christian beliefs—or, the common beliefs that have evolved since the time of Jesus—in this teaching. He wrote, ‘The future judgment is not based on belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection, but on doing good things for those in need. Later Christians—including most notably Paul, but also the writers of the Gospels—maintained that it was belief in Jesus that would bring a person into the coming Kingdom. But nothing in this passage even hints at the need to believe in Jesus per se. . . . What matters is helping the poor, oppressed, and needy.’

“Professor Vermes also pointed out, and in what should be blindingly obvious hindsight, this apocalyptic message was stated quite clearly in the Lord’s Prayer in the passage from Matthew 6:10: ‘Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in heaven.’ No one notices the subtlety anymore, because it gets recited endlessly and taken for granted with few people ever stopping to examine the meaning behind the words. However, the professor does kindly provide all of us with a critical analysis. ‘The call for eschatological fulfilment is the essential summary of the preaching of Jesus. It provides the Lord’s Prayer with an aura of urgency . . . which petitions for the establishment of God’s reign in the present time. . . . The fact that the object of the supplication is to bring about the Kingdom of God, and not the return of Christ, clearly distinguishes Jesus’ perspective from that of the early church.’”

“I have never put two and two together like that before, but you’re right, it is pretty obvious when I look at it in light of the new perspective,” Mr. Hobbes admitted.

“You liked that? Hang on, there’s more. The second half—‘Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in heaven’—reiterates the core apocalyptic message. As Professor Vermes noted, ‘This petition represents the practical response on the part of the disciples of Jesus to the call for the coming of the Kingdom. . . . Jesus combines obedience to the Father’s will with the eschatological realization of the Kingdom.’

“We should also keep in mind that the apocalyptic message Jesus preached was not a physical destruction of the planet to be followed by an afterlife in a spiritual and heavenly realm. His message was a revelation in keeping with ideas put forth in the book of Daniel, that this would be God’s Kingdom on Earth. Here, God would rule directly after evil was destroyed and people were able to live in love and harmony in his presence. Amusingly, or maybe not so, this message of the coming Kingdom of God is also a major tenet of the Mormon faith. It is a key aspect of belief for those living in the polygamist sects who await the arrival of the Kingdom in isolation, supposedly preparing for the end-times by following the bizarre commandments originally thought up—pardon me, *revealed*—by their founder, Joseph Smith.

“Contemporaries of Professor Ehrman like John Dominic Crossan, who is not only a religious scholar but also a former Catholic priest, disagree that Jesus had an apocalyptic message. Crossan feels that the message was more of a personal and internal transformative nature; that the Kingdom is already present within each of us, through a belief in Jesus himself. For scholars like Crossan, the Bible is not meant to be taken literally—apologies to you fundamentalists who respectfully disagree—but that the metaphorical meanings of the stories are the true message. People of this persuasion point to Luke 17:21 to justify this belief. ‘Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you.’ Professor Ehrman points out, ‘Unfortunately for this view, as most of its opponents have been quick to point out, the verse is found only in Luke (i.e., it is not multiply attested), a Gospel, as we have seen, that went some way to tone down the apocalyptic dimensions of our earlier sources.’

“Professor Ehrman also points out the gradual trend in the Gospels, that as the further in time away from Jesus they were written, the more the apocalyptic message becomes subdued and increasingly preoccupied with a pure belief in Jesus as the messiah and his resurrection. The Gospels—from Mark to John, the earliest to the last written around 95 CE—slowly morph as the apocalyptic message in Mark starts to become muted in Matthew and Luke. For example, Mark written around 65 CE, expected the end to come during the lifetime of the apostles. Compare this with Luke where the author was writing in approximately 80 to 90 CE after all the disciples had likely died and no cosmic fireworks had yet been seen. Luke began to make the necessary changes, like saying ‘the Kingdom of God is within you’ through a belief in Jesus, rather than a Kingdom still to come.

“The apocalyptic tone is mostly absent by, what is then, the fully developed and theologically oriented proclamation of John 11:25-26: ‘I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.’ In John, the *original*

message of Jesus—the coming Kingdom—was gone. The new Christianized message had become, and still remains, one of faith in Jesus himself.

“As Professor Ehrman summed up the teachings of Jesus,” Jeff stated, once again condensing the argument from different pages:

In a nutshell, the argument is that we know beyond any reasonable doubt what happened at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and we know what happened in its aftermath. The continuity between the two is Jesus’ public ministry itself. This ministry began on a decidedly apocalyptic note; its aftermath continued apocalyptically. Since Jesus is the link between the two, his message and mission, his words and deeds, must also have been apocalyptic. That is to say, the beginning and end are the keys to the middle. . . .

. . . After Jesus’ death, those who believed in him established communities of followers throughout the Mediterranean. We have a good idea what these Christians believed, because some of them have left us writings. What is striking is that these earliest writings are imbued with apocalyptic thinking. The earliest Christians were Jews who believed that they were living at the end of the age and that Jesus himself was to return from heaven as a cosmic judge of the earth, to punish those who opposed God and to reward the faithful. The church that emerged in Jesus’ wake was apocalyptic. . . .

. . . It should be quite clear by now that Jesus’ predictions about the coming Kingdom cannot be watered down, compromised, Milquetoasted to death. For they form the very core of his teachings. His entire proclamation consisted in a call to prepare for the coming Kingdom, which would be brought in by a final judgment through the imminent appearance of the Son of Man. Jesus’ teaching of what we might call “ethics” was advanced to show people how they could be ready. . . .

. . . Ever since Jesus pronounced this message of imminent judgment and salvation, he has had followers who agreed—even though the church at large has argued, sometimes vociferously, that Jesus must not have been speaking these words literally but figuratively. . . .

. . . It’s no wonder that a figurative construal of Jesus’ words became so popular so soon and achieved such dominance for so long. If Jesus were to be taken literally—that is, if he really meant that the Son of Man was to arrive in the lifetime of his disciples—he was obviously wrong. . . .

. . . This message has not, for the most part, been overwhelmingly popular among people who call themselves Jesus’ followers. . . .

. . . Later interpreters did not embrace the full message of Jesus with all its rich texture and nuance.

“Wow,” Mr. Hobbes uttered in astonishment. “That certainly does put a whole new spin on everything Christians, including myself, have believed for centuries. Perhaps I need to reflect on the fundamental beliefs of my faith,” he volunteered honestly.

“It is rather appropriate that you chose that word, Mr. Hobbes, as the word *fundamental* implies getting back to the basics of the original teachings, of which, most fundamentalists demonstrate a clear ignorance. Fundamentalists choose instead to adhere to warped and twisted later versions of Christian doctrine and not the core essentials of the true message of Jesus that they claim to follow. If they were truly back-to-basics people, fundamentalists would give up their possessions and leave their families, as the disciples did, to follow this Chicken Little ‘sky is falling’ preacher and wander the countryside doing good deeds in practice for the time of God’s Kingdom on Earth. Then, and only then, would they really be fundamentalist Christians, but I don’t see that happening anytime soon. Do you? Nope, didn’t think so.

“The same belief in the imminent arrival of the Kingdom was echoed by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:15: ‘We who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord.’ Note that Paul didn’t say *those* who are alive, but *we*, implying that he too fully expected to be present for the return of Jesus and the coming Kingdom. However, once the last disciple died, it became uncomfortably clear to the leaders of the Christian movement that these predictions were an inconvenient reminder of how unmistakably wrong both Jesus and Paul had been about the arrival of God’s earthly Kingdom. This annoying feature of the apocalyptic message in the ministries of Jesus and Paul started causing troublesome questions among the flock, so the Church

elders began to change the fundamental theology of the message. The spiritual afterlife belief evolved when the Kingdom failed to materialize, and the message went from being one of an imminent coming Kingdom of God here on Earth to one of heavenly reward by believing in the resurrection of Jesus as the savior and Son of Man. This is the same shift that occurred when the Jews changed their expectations of a coming messiah to one of a spiritual messianic age in the afterlife, as formulated in the book of Daniel.

“Now, speaking of the Son of Man it is very important to understand this title in its original and proper context, and not the one later Christians have given it.”

“Oh, dear Lord, now you are going to tell us all about how Jesus isn’t really the Son of Man that Christians believe he is?” Linda asked gloomily, as she foresaw that yet another one of her cherished beliefs was about to go up in smoke.

“That is exactly what I am going to do, how very perceptive of you. Just as the fundamental nature of Jewish beliefs changed with Daniel, the Son of Man references in Daniel also took on new meanings for Christians. Let me illustrate by quoting the relevant passage from Daniel 7:13-14. ‘I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.’

“The confusion began when later Christians started to assign their concepts of who they thought Jesus was to the figure prophetically described in this passage from Daniel. Since Jesus referred to the coming of this Son of Man as the entity that would usher in the new Kingdom, later post-crucifixion converts began to assume that when Jesus spoke of the Son of Man he was referring to himself and not about a third party. You can plainly see Jesus is not referring to himself, but to another being entirely, if you read the Gospels carefully; especially Mark. Take Mark 8:38 for example. ‘Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’ Note that the passage very clearly stated when *he* comes, not when *I* come.

“Professor Ehrman explained how this unfortunate Christian misinterpretation evolved: ‘Moreover, these Christians knew that Jesus had spent a good deal of time talking about one who was soon to come from heaven in judgment over the earth. For them, he was himself now exalted to heaven; clearly, then, he must be the judge about whom he had spoken. Therefore, in their view, Jesus was soon to return in judgment as the Son of Man.’ There is a slight problem here as the Son of Man references in Daniel were written approximately one hundred sixty-five years before Jesus was born, during the time of the Maccabean revolt and, therefore, don’t apply to Jesus. As with the Prophets who wrote about the political crises of their days, Daniel must also be understood in the same regards. The understanding that associated the Son of Man with the messianic figure, as formulated in Daniel as a response to the Seleucid attempts to suppress Judaism, was a latecomer to Jewish beliefs and not commonly shared among all Jews.”

“What are you talking about?” Linda once again protested. “The Hebrew Bible is full of prophecies of the coming of the messiah, so why couldn’t the Son of Man be a reference to Jesus as the fulfillment of all the prophecies?”

“Well, the answer to your question is both yes and no that the Bible is full of prophecies. Yes, there are prophecies for the coming of a messiah, but no, they were not about Jesus or the Son of Man—except in Daniel. I will cover Jesus as the messiah shortly, but let’s stay on topic with the Son of Man. The ministry of Jesus was based heavily, if not entirely, on Daniel, as indicated by the fact that he was preaching about the coming of the Son of Man. The Son of Man mythology *only* appears in Daniel; though the term, in small caps, does appear in other books of the Bible in Numbers 23, Job, Psalms, Proverbs 8, and in the Major Prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The Son of Man imagery also appears in other apocalyptic books of the era that were not included in the Bible, such as The Similitudes of Enoch and 4 Ezra.

“Further, the Son of Man in Daniel also represented a wholly new messianic motif, one calling for a heavenly messiah to come, and not the earthly warrior-king or priest that was traditionally expected. The heavenly imagery of the Son of Man is two-fold: one, it draws upon ancient Canaanite mythology; and two, the Son of Man was understood within Judaism at the time—and perhaps it still is within some Jewish circles—to be the Archangel Michael, the protector of the children of Israel, God’s pit bull.”

“Pfffft,” Linda sputtered in dismissal.

“You disagree with the belief that Michael is the Son of Man?”

“Of course I disagree,” Linda obstinately stood her ground.

“Why do you disagree?”

“Because it’s ridiculous, that’s why,” Linda retorted, with all the superiority and confidence she could muster.

“You can’t be serious. That’s your answer?” Jeff challenged.

“The New Testament says Jesus is the Son of Man who will come to redeem the world. It’s in the Bible, I believe it, and that passage in Daniel is the prophecy that proves it.”

“Then you might be disappointed to learn that you, and many other Christian interpreters, are dead wrong. Let’s back up a few verses to Daniel 7:9. ‘I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire.’ Also, to refresh verse thirteen again, ‘I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.’

“There are a few clues in the wording that point to older, pagan Canaanite mythology in this vision. Permit me once again to let an expert explain it better than I can,” Jeff admitted, selecting a book he had used earlier in the Old Testament class. “Professor Collins, in his analysis of the book of Daniel in *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, deconstructs this passage and described it as follows:

In Daniel 7:9 thrones are set up and a white-haired “Ancient of Days” appears, surrounded by thousands of servants. This figure is evidently God. It is surprising, then, when another figure appears “with the clouds of heaven.” In the Hebrew Bible, the figure who rides on the clouds is always YHWH, the God of Israel. Yet in Daniel 7 this figure is clearly subordinate to the Ancient of Days. The juxtaposition of two divine figures can be understood against the background of the Canaanite myth. There the high god was El, a venerable figure with a white beard. The young fertility god was Baal, who is called the “rider of the clouds” in the Ugaritic texts. In the Hebrew Bible, YHWH usually combines the roles of El and Baal. In Daniel 7, however, they are separated. The influence of the Canaanite mythic tradition is clearly evident in the relationships between the Ancient of Days, the rider of the clouds, and the beasts from the sea.

“Pfffft,” Linda sputtered again. “What’s your point?”

“One, it points to the continuing tradition of incorporating imagery, mythology, and the gods of surrounding cultures into later Hebrew writings. Two, if the Ancient of Days is the Hebrew God and the old Canaanite god, Baal, had been absorbed into Yahweh, who then is the rider of the clouds, the Son of Man, supposed to be?”

“Jesus, obviously,” Linda decreed with righteous authority and an annoyingly petulant tone.

“Wrong. In the writings of this period in history holy ones are almost always angels. You want proof? If you recall, the last point I made in the Old Testament class, in Daniel 12:1 the Archangel Michael was *specifically* named in Daniel in reference to the Son of Man who would come to redeem Israel. This passage is a prophetic reference to God’s general coming to free his people from the hated Seleucids who were trying to repress traditional Judaism.

“Both Schweitzer and Vermes also stated that this title was assigned to Jesus by later Christians. Schweitzer wrote, ‘Jesus had never, so ran the thesis of [Lietzmann], applied to Himself the title Son of Man, because in the Aramaic the title did not exist, and on linguistic grounds could not have existed. . . . That Jesus meant Himself when He spoke of the Son of Man, none of His hearers could have suspected.’ And Vermes echoed, ‘According to the available documentation it was only after AD 70 that ‘son of man’ became the designation of an individual entrusted with an important messianic or judicial function. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Jesus used ‘son of man’ as a title.’

“It was the Gospel writers, or their editors, who gave this title to Jesus. These later revisionists put the words into the mouth of Jesus, claiming that he declared himself to be the Son of Man, changing what he said as a mortal prophet about the coming of another; the archangel, Michael. The proto-orthodox—those who believed in the divinity of Jesus before it became an officially codified belief—altered their version of the Gospels, and scholars can see where certain words, phrases, and concepts were deliberately fine-tuned to match their perception about the nature of Jesus. Using the Mark 8:38 passage I cited a moment ago, as an example of this kind of change, Professor Ehrman explained:

Within several years after his death he was proclaimed in small communities scattered throughout the eastern Mediterranean as the unique Son of God, the coming Son of Man, the

Jewish Messiah, and the Lord of all. Christians who understood Jesus in these ways naturally told stories about him in light of their understanding. And so, for example, when they mentioned Jesus' teaching about the Son of Man, they sometimes changed what he said so that instead of speaking about this other one to come, he was said to be speaking of himself, using the first-person singular: "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32; contrast Mark 8:38 . . .). So, too, when he spoke about himself, they sometimes changed words given in the first-person singular ("I") to the title "Son of Man."

"The fact that Christians fervently wish and hope it to be Jesus doesn't make it true, and denying the reality of the Son of Man meaning in Daniel only makes believers look stubborn. Once again, the facts are that the Son of Man passage was written in a very specific contextual time and place, the Jewish persecution of 167 BCE. It does *not* belong to the Christian tradition, no matter how badly you all want it to apply to your crackpot doctrines."

"Our traditions are *not* crackpot doctrines!" protested Linda vehemently, with all the conviction of the truly devout.

"Whatever," Jeff countered dismissively. "The fact remains that the apocalyptic visions in Daniel reflect the existential threat the Jewish people were facing at the hands of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the message of the story was to take heart and have faith that evil would ultimately be defeated by the forces of the just. The end is known and the righteous shall prevail over tyranny, which is exactly what happened when the Maccabees defeated the Seleucids and established a sovereign, but brief, Jewish kingdom under Hasmonean rule."

"So, there you go," Linda said smugly. "Daniel's prophecy came true and the Jews were saved from annihilation by God."

"Yes, they were saved, though not by the divine intervention of God sending Michael, the Son of Man, to do battle on their behalf. They were saved because a group of Jewish men stood up and fought back—a slight difference in interpretation. If you insist on subscribing to the literal interpretation that Jesus is the Son of Man, then the prophecy in Daniel would mean Jesus came to save the Jews over one hundred fifty years before he was born."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," Linda retorted.

"Oh Jesus," Jeff muttered. "Yet another standard non-answer from your apologetics playbook. Could you get a clue, or at least try to maintain some degree of consistency in your arguments instead of throwing out half-baked rationalizations and uttering weak clichés."

"I still don't care what you say. Jesus is the way and the light. If you would only listen to the message of the Holy Spirit, your soul might be saved. Jesus *is* the Son of God and believing in him provides everlasting life," Linda said faithfully.

"Ah, yes . . . the Son of God terminology. This is exactly where the fathers of the Christian religion *really* went off course and just started making stuff up."

"What are you talking about this time?" Linda questioned. "Of course Jesus was the Son of God."

"Why, of course, is he the Son of God?" Jeff asked. "Let me guess, because the New Testament says so."

"You got it."

"That phrase couldn't possibly have been misinterpreted in any way?"

"How could it have been misinterpreted?" Mr. Hobbes asked.

"Well, think about who wrote the Gospels and what language they were written in."

"You mentioned earlier the four Gospels were all written in Greek," Mr. Hobbes replied.

"That is correct, they were written by converts in the Greek-speaking half of the Roman Empire. As Professor E. P. Sanders wrote in *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, Son of God applied to 'a person standing in a special relationship to God, who chose him to accomplish a task of great importance.' This title was often given to kings of Judah, to the people of Israel in general, or to an overly righteous person as in the case of Jesus. However, if you had been brought up in Greek culture, where you were familiar with the legends of Zeus fathering Perseus, and you converted to Christianity where you heard Jesus described as the Son of God, how do you think you would have interpreted this title? But, first, keep in mind the fact that you were *not* familiar with the Hebrew meaning of this title."

"I suppose I would take it literally, as with other Greek deities having children, that Jesus was actually the son of Mary and God."

“And, if you were reading the Gospels and you had that mistaken interpretation of a Jewish title, how would that shape your theological perspectives?”

“I would assume that Jesus, being the offspring of God, might also have divine attributes.”

“And that is exactly what happened to early non-Jewish Christian converts with pagan beliefs. Let me quote from the legendary expert of world mythology, Joseph Campbell, and his words from *The Power of Myth*. ‘But in the Hebrew tradition the idea of a *son* of God is repulsive, it is not considered at all. The Messiah as the son of God is not actually God’s son. He is one who in his character and dignity is worthy to be *likened* to the son of God. I’m sure there’s no idea of a virgin birth in that tradition. The virgin birth comes into Christianity by way of the Greek tradition.’ And reiterating the repulsive part is Professor Sanders again: ‘In the decades following Jesus’ death and resurrection Christians would give Jesus both titles (Messiah and Son of God) and interpret them in ways that some Jews considered blasphemous. ‘Son of God’ in particular would come to mean that Jesus was not a mere mortal.’

“Additionally, the baptismal passage in Mark 1:9-11 that described the heavens opening, the dove descending and the voice proclaiming, ‘Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,’ added fuel to the Son of God beliefs. This passage and other writings, influenced by the virgin mistranslation of Isaiah 7:14 in the Greek copies of the Bible, went on to *completely* reshape the message of Jesus and his *entire* persona, resulting in the later beliefs about his imaginary divine nature.

“As Christianity continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire, different ideas about who Jesus was evolved and took on a life of their own, specifically by these later converts who were not apocalyptic Jews. These later non-Jewish Christians would have been completely unfamiliar with the meanings behind the apocalyptic message of Jesus within its original Hebrew context, and how the title of Son of God would have been properly understood as applying to righteous Jews.

“Speaking of non-Jewish Christian converts, another embarrassing oversight is the fact that Jesus *never* intended his message, or his Kingdom, for the great unwashed masses outside the Jewish faith.”

“What do you mean?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“I mean Jesus was *exclusively* Jewish in his outlook and he *explicitly* stated non-Jews were not welcome. It says so right in the Bible, plain as day, all one has to do is open their eyes to see what is written.” Jeff summarized the main points from several different pages again, and continued, “As Professor Vermes noted:

The most striking and incontrovertible statements are contained in Matthew. . . . There Jesus bluntly asserted that his mission was exclusively intended for Jews: ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matthew 15:24). He gave the same pro-Jewish directive to his apostles, too. Not only were they positively ordered to teach, heal and exorcise only ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’, but they were also expressly forbidden to minister among non-Jews: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans’ (Matthew 10:5-6). . . . The substance of this assertion is backed by the story of all three Synoptic Gospels. Jesus preached his message only to Jews. . . .

. . . These declarations, patent in themselves, are further supported by sayings in which Jesus declared non-Jews to be unworthy to receive his teaching. Here Mark joins Matthew and both speak with a single voice. In the story of the Syrophenician woman Jesus states: ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs’ (Mark 7:27; Matthew 15:26). The meaning is clear: the ‘dogs’, a sarcastic nickname for Gentiles, should not usurp ‘the [Jewish] children’s bread’. Equally sharp is the proverbial wisdom maxim through which Jesus broadcasts the same message: ‘Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine’ (Matthew 7:6). In these unequivocal utterances Jesus is presented as the champion of absolute Jewish exclusivism. . . .

. . . Having considered the whole evidence, we are faced with the following dilemma. *Either* Jesus adopted a strictly pro-Jewish stance and the later introduction into the Gospels of pro-Gentile leanings must reflect the point of view of the early church, which was by then almost exclusively non-Jewish. *Or* it was Jesus who adopted the universalist stand, and this was replaced at a later stage by Jewish exclusivism. . . . Bearing all these facts in mind, which alternative is the more likely? . . .

. . . In short, the view that Jesus ministered only to the lost sheep of Israel and instructed his disciples to do the same is the historically correct alternative. Disturbing though this may

sound to the uninformed, the order to proclaim the good news of salvation to all the nations must be struck out from the list of the authentic sayings of Jesus. . . .

. . . The only logical inference that can be drawn from these premises is that Jesus was concerned only with Jews, because in his view citizenship of the Kingdom of God was reserved for them alone. . . .

. . . The same church, in the footsteps of St Paul, its true founder, succeeded in removing the major obstacle impeding the dissemination of Jesus' message. Jesus considered his mission to be restricted to Jews and explicitly ordered his envoys not to preach the gospel to Gentiles. The apostles, who were delivering a freshly tailored message to Jews about the Messiahship of Jesus, on witnessing the progressive fiasco of the evangelization at home gave in to Paul's insistent pressure, and opened the church to all nations. The pagans entered in droves, first diluting and soon entirely transforming the Jewish heritage of Jesus. . . .

. . . Yet on reading the original message, thinking and honest members of the various Christian faiths may (should?) feel the need for a thorough reexamination of the fundamentals of their belief, ethics and piety, a reconsideration which may demand a complete doctrinal restructuring, a new 'reformation.'

"A thorough reexamination of the fundamentals that demands a complete doctrinal restructuring of your faith; that pretty much sums up Christianity in one sound bite," Jeff reiterated. "That is an incredibly compelling declaration; especially coming from one of the most distinguished and respected biblical scholars of our time. Sorry, Linda, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but quite blatantly your precious Jesus said his message wasn't for the Gentile likes of you and your ancestors. Given your evangelical belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, this must be true, so I'm afraid you won't be admitted to the coming Kingdom."

"Whatever," she answered, rolling her eyes in dismissal. "I still believe Jesus is the messiah and that all Christians who believe in his resurrection will go to heaven."

"Then you are wasting your time, and your life, according to the teachings of Jesus about the Kingdom not being available for non-Jews; and especially since he wasn't the messiah, either. The belief that Jesus was the messiah, in *any* sense of the Jewish meaning, is totally wrong. The idea that Jews expected a suffering messiah who would be beaten and killed was *never* part of Jewish prophecy. Also, despite valiant attempts by Matthew and others, it is *completely* unfounded in the Hebrew Bible. As Professor Vermes noted:

Bearing in mind that the crucifixion of Jesus was perhaps the greatest difficulty which the early church had to overcome in proclaiming him as the Messiah promised to the Jews, the absence of detailed biblical proof concerning this essential doctrine is astonishing. Though allegedly Jesus several times foretold his future suffering and death, vaguely hinting that they were fulfilling Scripture, he never backed these predictions with actual excerpts from the Bible. Remarkably, when St Paul later declared that Christ 'died in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3), he did not give this as a message of the Lord, nor did he quote chapter and verse from the holy books to substantiate his claim.

"A number of passages in the Hebrew Bible that Christians interpreted as messianic and claimed to be referring to Jesus, either cannot be, or are not, messianic in nature as they date from the period before the messiah concept had emerged. With a proper understanding of the background on how and why messianism emerged within its original Jewish context, it becomes clear that these passages cannot be regarded as messianic. Truly messianic passages can *only* come from the post-exilic, Second Temple period which started in the late 500s BCE.

"Messianism emerged in response to the removal of the House of David from power during the Babylonian exile, which started in 598 BCE with the defeat of Judah by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. The descendants of King Josiah, who crafted the patriarchal and Exodus narratives we discussed earlier, are the key players in this historical event recorded in 2 Kings 24 in which Josiah's grandson, Jeconiah, and his household were taken to Babylon as captives. Josiah's other son, and uncle of Jeconiah, Zedekiah, was put in place as the puppet ruler by the Babylonians. However, Zedekiah rebelled, and Nebuchadnezzar came back around 587, destroyed the Temple of Solomon, and initiated the second

deportation of exiles; but, first Nebuchadnezzar terminated Zedekiah's lineage, as noted in 2 Kings 25:7, 'And they slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him with fetters of brass, and carried him to Babylon.'

"The end of Zedekiah's line, however, was not the end of the Davidic House, as Jeconiah and his family were still alive in Babylon, where Jeconiah is traditionally considered to be the first exilarch, or patriarch of the exile community. It was only after the exile occurred that the messianic tradition was born amid the hopes of the Jews for their freedom and the restoration of the House of David, through Jeconiah. As the prophet Jeremiah wrote in 23:5, 'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.' However, this should be contrasted against Jeremiah's Curse against Jeconiah, listed only one chapter earlier in 22:30, as yet another of those pesky contradictions that evangelicals claim are nonexistent: 'Thus saith the Lord, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah.'

"If we set aside Jeremiah's Curse as a later editorial insertion and focus on the prophecy in chapter twenty-three, we see the origins of the messianic calls for the return of a king of the lineage of David. This devotion to Davidic kings was rooted in the passage from 2 Samuel 7:16, where God makes a covenant with David, promising that his seed would reign in perpetuity: 'And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established forever before thee: thy throne shall be established forever.' So, the exiles looked to the family of Jeconiah, and 1 Chronicles 3 provides a list of David's descendants, including Jeconiah's son, Salathiel, who was the grandfather of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel is important because, as hereditary exilarch, he was sent around 520 BCE to be the governor of Yehud Medinata, as Judah was then known as an autonomous province of the Persians. Zerubbabel was also mentioned in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as returning to Judah along with the High Priest, Joshua, where the two oversaw the building of the Second Temple.

"There are two other messianic references surrounding hopes for Zerubbabel. The first is from Zechariah 4:9-10, 'The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it; and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto you. For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth.' The second is from Haggai 2:21-23, 'Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth; And I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen; and I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother. In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the Lord, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the Lord of hosts.'

"Unfortunately for the hopes of the Jewish people, as captured by Zechariah and Haggai, things did not turn out as planned. In another of his scholarly deconstructions, *The Scepter and the Star*, Professor Collins wrote:

Haggai and Zechariah were active in Jerusalem about 520 BCE, and were instrumental in the building of the Second Temple. . . .

. . . Zechariah also reassures the High Priest Joshua by promising that "I am going to bring my servant the Branch." The term Branch is an allusion to Jeremiah's prophecy and must be understood as messianic, in the sense that it implies the restoration of the Davidic line. In Zechariah's time, the hopes for such restoration rested with Zerubbabel. . . .

. . . There is, of course, no evidence that Zerubbabel ever played the role for which Haggai and Zechariah cast him, but the prophetic texts attest to hopes that can reasonably be called messianic. They would entail the fulfillment of the promise to David and the dawn of a new, utopian age. . . .

. . . There is good reason, then, to hold that Haggai and Zechariah regarded Zerubbabel as a messianic figure. . . .

. . . Zerubbabel is the only potential Jewish messiah of whom we hear in the Persian period. For another Jewish figure for whom messianic status is claimed we have to come all the way down to the Roman era. . . .

... After the time of Zerubbabel, messianism does not figure prominently in Second Temple Judaism. ...

... In all, then, we have very little evidence of messianism in Judaism in the period 500-200 BCE. ...

... The hopes of most Jews in the period 550-150 BCE were for a benevolent overlord who would protect and promote the Jewish people, rather than for national independence. ...

... It is often assumed that there was an unbroken tradition of Jewish messianism from the biblical period to postbiblical Judaism. ... But the emergence of messianism in the first century BCE does not warrant any inference about a messianic movement at an earlier time. As we have seen, the evidence suggests that messianism was virtually dormant from the early fifth to the late second century BCE.

“Therefore, messianism at its inception was barely on the radar of Jewish consciousness beyond the initial hopes for Zerubbabel. Not until late Second Temple Judaism did it reemerge and evolve into a completely different belief held by Jews, which was then subsequently reimagined entirely by later Christians. The passages Christians cite come primarily from books that not only predate the origins of messianism, but from post-exilic insertions into pre-exilic books. For example, Micah 5:2 stating that the messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of David, is considered suspect by biblical scholars. Micah was written in the Assyrian period, and only the first three chapters are thought to be the original work of the prophet, as the later chapters imply the Temple had been rebuilt in the post-exile era and are thus later editorial additions.

“Similar to the latter half of Micah, biblical scholars have the same view of the book they named 1 Isaiah, chapters one to thirty-nine, for the same reason that it also deals with Assyria in the time of the actual prophet. Therefore, Isaiah 7:14 which Matthew used in conjunction with Micah 5—not to mention that it is about a different historical figure entirely—can also be dismissed from the list of authentic messianic passages. Regarding another out-of-place insertion into a pre-exilic text, Professor Collins stated, ‘The authenticity of Isaiah 11:1-9 (“A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse”) is also widely disputed. The reference to the “stump” of Jesse naturally leads one to suppose that the line had been cut off when this oracle was composed.’ Isaiah 11 parallels Jeremiah 23, and Professor Collins continued, ‘A similar uncertainty surrounds the messianic oracles in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.’ However, this could explain the contradiction with the curse upon Jeconiah in Jeremiah 22, which, perhaps was the original and the prophecy in the following chapter was the insertion.

“Micah and Isaiah, living in the eighth century, would not have written passages about a restoration of the House of David while a Davidic king still sat on the throne; and recall prophecy was about interpreting the divine will of contemporary events, not future predictions. These passages prefigure a political situation and religious ideology that did not arise until hundreds of years after the prophets died, and are obvious forgeries to anyone paying attention. These sections retroactively inserted into the actual books written by the real Isaiah and Micah had extremely important impacts on the later development of Christian doctrines. Clearly, the passage in Isaiah 11 was anachronistically inserted into the Assyrian section of the book and somebody just tacked on more chapters to Micah, many centuries later, to suit a messianic agenda.

“Regarding the meaning of the Hebrew word messiah, it simply means the anointed one, a term given to the Judahite kings of the past who were anointed with oils as a symbol of their divine right to rule. It is from the Greek word for anointed, *christos*, that we get Jesus Christ; or strictly interpreting it through its Jewish meaning: Jesus, the anointed one. As to anointing, this was not just for kings in the texts, but was applied to prophets, as well. In 1 Kings 19:16, Elijah is told to anoint Elisha; and in Isaiah 61, the writer claims a prophetic voice because God has anointed him. Additionally, more than one type of anointed, or messianic, figure was described in the texts. In Zechariah 4, which I quoted a few moments ago about Zerubbabel, the passage continued: ‘And I answered again, and said unto him, What be these two olive branches which through the two golden pipes empty the golden oil out of themselves?’ The two anointed figures here are Zerubbabel and Joshua, the High Priest.

“Therefore, alongside expectations for a royal messiah, is the role of the priestly messiah. Professor Collins again on this topic: ‘The prominence of the priesthood was more enduring than that of the Davidic line in the Second Temple period. As we have noted, the two anointed offices appear to be collapsed into one in Zechariah 6:12. For most of the postexilic period, with exceptions in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah,

the High Priest was sole leader in Judah.’ As I have demonstrated repeatedly so far, Judaism is not static, but constantly evolving, and these two messianic ideals were joined by two more. I noted previously that messianism lay dormant until about 200 BCE, so, what happened to change all that?”

Mr. Hobbes ventured a guess, recalling the discussion about the Son of Man, “Daniel and the Maccabean revolt?”

“Someone has actually paid attention to the details; gold star!” Jeff said playfully. “After the Maccabean revolt, the brother of Judah Maccabee, Simon, became the first leader of the Hasmonean dynasty. Though Simon never used the term king, and Judah was still subject to the Seleucids, this was still the first Jewish person to govern their own country in centuries. By 110 BCE, his son, John Hyrcanus, succeeded in breaking away from the rapidly disintegrating Seleucid Empire, establishing the first independent Jewish kingdom in 600 years since Uzziah yielded to the Assyrians and Judah became a vassal state. In 104 BCE, his son and successor, Aristobulus, became the first to assume the title of king.

“Don’t forget that the Maccabees were also dynastic Temple priests, and combining these two anointed roles, king and priest into one, was considered blasphemous by some. Using the covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, the Scribes reignited the claims for the royal messiah as a direct challenge to the Hasmoneans for daring to grasp far above their station. Confirming that the recently revived Davidic messianic fervor was due to the efforts of the Scribes, is Mark 12:35 when Jesus was asked if he was the messiah, ‘And Jesus answered and said, while he taught in the temple, How say the scribes that the messiah is the son of David?’

“Wow!” Mr. Hobbes uttered. “You just blew my mind.”

“Quite informative, isn’t it? That’s like Jesus saying, ‘Why would I claim to be Harry Potter? Everyone knows J.K. Rowling wrote that story.’ It puts a whole new perspective on the entire ‘Jesus is the son of David’ propaganda that emerged in later Christianity, when it’s so devastatingly contradicted by the very words of Jesus. Which brings us to the made-up genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, which the authors used in an attempt to justify this lineage; and, in typical biblical fashion, don’t match. Surprising, isn’t it? The most notable difference between the lists in these two Gospels is the descent from Solomon’s line in Matthew and from Nathan in Luke, a rather drastic contradiction that cannot be easily overlooked. The only overlap between Matthew and Luke is their convergence at Zerubbabel and his grandfather, Salathiel. How these two people could have descended from Solomon *and* Nathan, is one of those eternal mysterious ways of God. Further, 1 Chronicles 3 also lists the descendants from David to Zerubbabel, and beyond; but this list doesn’t match Matthew’s perfectly. We have a three-way contradiction in the fabricated lineage of Jesus in this supposedly inerrant book. There is one other troubling little inconsistency: if Jesus is descended from David through Joseph, but Mary was a virgin impregnated by God, then Joseph was *not* even the father. So, how could Jesus be the Davidic messianic heir in the first place? I’ll leave you to ponder that little dilemma on your own time; have fun.

“However, in the Pastoral Epistles, the faithful are warned against just this kind of activity. Allow me to read 1 Timothy 1:4. ‘Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than Godly edifying which is in faith.’ Or, there is also Titus 3:9 which stated, ‘But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.’ Since these epistles were included as books of the New Testament canon, they *must*, therefore, be *absolutely* right and *without* error,” Jeff said, rolling his eyes with the sarcasm dripping from his tongue, “but these verses directly oppose the genealogies listed in the Gospels. Yet another stark contradiction and example of the oversights that are common throughout the Bible.

“Enough with the commentary, Jeff. Moving on, what about these two additional messianic figures you mentioned?” Mr. Hobbes inquired.

“Let me go back to Professor Collins again:

What matters is the expectation of a Davidic king, of an ideal priest, of an eschatological prophet. Besides, there was no Jewish orthodoxy in the matter of messianic expectation, and so we should expect some variation. . . .

. . . We shall find four basic messianic paradigms (king, priest, prophet, and heavenly messiah), and they were not equally widespread. . . .

. . . The messianic paradigm that was applied most successfully to Jesus in the Gospels was that of the heavenly messiah or Son of Man. . . .

... Jewish expectations around the turn of the era were not for a generic “messiah,” but for a royal messiah who would be the branch of David, or a priestly messiah or Aaron, or a prophet like Moses. While some permutations and combinations were possible, a prophetic figure does not become a king or a priest by virtue of being a “messiah,” nor does a royal messiah automatically become a priest or prophet. There were different messianic paradigms, not one composite concept of Messiah.

“Daniel is where we see the heavenly messiah, his Son of Man figure, emerge not only in the literature of the Jews but taking hold in the consciousness of the people over the next two hundred years. There are some significant differences between the Davidic royal and the Danielic heavenly messianic concepts that need to be highlighted. The first is that the royal messiah was expected to be a warrior-king, who would rain hellfire on the opponents of Israel, or as Professor Collins put it, ‘violent destruction of the wicked is a standard element in the repertoire of the Davidic messiah.’ The royal messiah would reestablish an earthly kingdom, small k, for the people of Israel. Whereas Daniel’s Son of Man would usher in God’s Kingdom, capital K. This is the Kingdom narrative that Jesus preached, and why scholars know Jesus was an end-times prophet hawking Daniel’s vision and the coming Son of Man.

“The only reference to a messiah in Daniel comes from 9:25-26, where it refers to the High Priest. Also, noticeably absent from the messianic expectations in Daniel was the call for any kind of return to the Davidic rule of a traditional monarchy. This is not unexpected, given the focus of Daniel was on a heavenly redeemer and an entirely new earthly world order. However, some aspects of the earlier Davidic conceptualizations were kept, as Professor Collins stated:

Rather than messianic expectation, then, what we have in Daniel is a transformation of the royal mythology. There is no role here for the Davidic king, and little for any human deliverer. . . .

... Some attributes traditionally associated with the Davidic messiah are here transferred to a heavenly savior. . . .

... In short, “Davidic messiah” and “Son of Man” were not mutually exclusive concepts. Each involves a cluster of motifs, which could be made to overlap. . . .

... This kind of transcendent, heavenly deliverer plays an increasingly important role in Jewish eschatology in the following centuries. It also provides a paradigm for messianic expectation that is quite different from the Davidic paradigm, although the two are sometimes combined. In this paradigm the “messiah” is a heavenly figure, more like an angel than a human being. This paradigm is developed in the *Similitudes of Enoch* and in the apocalypse of *4 Ezra* in the first century CE. It is a paradigm that would be crucially important for the Christian affirmation of Jesus as messiah, despite his evident failure to restore the earthly kingdom of Israel.

“So, let’s look at the role Jesus actually played compared to these models. He was not the Davidic messiah, as he was neither descended from David, nor was he a warrior who freed the people from foreign subjugation. Scratch that one. He was not a priest; scratch that one, too. He’s not the heavenly avenger, Michael; though, later Christians did twist his warnings about the Son of Man into first-person narratives about himself. Cross that one off the list, as well. That only leaves the prophetic messiah, which actually fits with the doomsday ministry he was recorded as leading. According to Professor Collins, only one of the stories of Jesus actually meshes with the misappropriated messianic imagery:

The only episode in Jesus’ career that fits a scriptural paradigm for a kingly messiah is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Matthew and John quote Zechariah 9:9 here: “Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Presumably, anyone familiar with the Scriptures would have caught the allusion. The historicity of the incident is questionable, precisely because it fits a biblical paradigm. . . . While Jesus functions as a prophet rather than as a royal pretender for most of his career, the manner of his entry into Jerusalem appears to be an enactment of the coming of the Davidic messiah. Here Jesus appears to change roles, from that of prophetic herald of the kingdom to that of king who ushers it in. . . . It is possible, of course, that Jesus did not intend to identify himself as the messiah, but intended his action as a prophetic sign that the coming of the messiah was imminent.

“Many of the passages chosen by the Gospel writers and claimed as messianic signposts pointing to Jesus were simply poetic stories, or they were based on events at the time of their composition and not to a future restoration of the House of David. Passages like Isaiah 7:14 have *never* been interpreted within Judaism to be about a messiah or a future salvation, as I pointed out. Not that these annoying facts prevented the Gospels from claiming otherwise; or stopped later Christians, misinformed by this propaganda, from perpetuating this error.

“The Christian concept of the Jewish messiah, along with most of the other ideas they borrowed from Judaism, was completely misinterpreted and turned upside down by these early followers in order to explain how the man they believed to have been the messiah ended up being crucified as a Roman criminal. It was this reimagining of the old prophecies, selectively chosen and edited by Matthew and the others, who merged this new spin on the messiah in order to rationalize their idea of who Jesus was.

“The author of Matthew is considered by scholars to be the most Jewish-oriented of the Gospel writers, as he made extensive use of the Jewish scriptures to defend this inconvenient reality. Just like Matthew distorted Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 as a basis for the belief in the birth of a redeemer, or how he used Micah 5:2 to place the birth in Bethlehem, he uses other randomly selected passages to justify the idea of a suffering messiah. Matthew cherry-picked bits of the texts for prophetic clues and took them out of context, merging them all together and attributing them to Jesus in order to tailor-make a narrative that fit the reality of his life. Matthew was the first-century equivalent of today’s notoriously biased media, taking out of context a sound bite here and a sound bite there, and totally blowing them out of proportion in a blatant misrepresentation of the facts.

“Let me give an example. This very famous line from the Passion narratives of the crucifixion should sound very familiar, as Matthew ripped it off from Psalm 22:1: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ This Psalm was not a prediction for the future suffering of Jesus—it was just strategically misappropriated for him by Matthew—but is, in fact, the tale of the suffering of a righteous man who ultimately has the last laugh when God dishes out some divine justice.

“Another major piece of pirated prophecy came from Isaiah 52-53, which speaks of God’s suffering servant, and most importantly for Christian beliefs, that he died for the sins of others. Please note from Isaiah 53:4-5, ‘Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.’ Professor Collins, once again, breaks down this skewed messianized reading: ‘There is surprisingly little use of Isaiah 53 in the New Testament, a fact that would be difficult to explain if that passage had been understood with reference to a suffering eschatological figure in Judaism.’

“Matthew knew exactly who and what all these passages referred to, and why they applied only to specific times and places for them to be relevant and understood correctly. They did *not* relate to the future suffering of the expected messiah, but he twisted them around for his own propaganda, anyway. These are just a few examples of how Matthew selectively chose a few conveniently worded passages—one that was mistakenly translated—and intentionally molded them into a prophetic fulfillment that changed everything for Christians. ‘Messiah Redux, buy your copy today!’ Sadly, this difference in messianic interpretation was the basis for a fundamental change in meaning among Christians, who basically got it all wrong.”

“I don’t care what you say, Jesus *is* the messiah,” Linda declared faithfully.

“Why? Why are you so sure he is the anointed one?”

“Because the Bible says so.”

“Do you really think that is a solid argument? The Bible is a rather dubious foundation, full of deliberate fabrications, on which to base your entire faith.”

“First you dared to question the existence of God, now you attack the divinity of his beloved son Jesus, and Christian beliefs as a whole. What you say is blasphemous.”

“For starters, Jesus wasn’t divine. He was just a man leading a ragtag band of believers with a different spin on Judaism. You should all ask yourselves, what is the most likely scenario? Was Jesus of a divine nature? Or, more realistically, was he just an ordinary man whose life became the invented propaganda of later writers to justify and rationalize their own agendas?”

“He was divine of course,” Linda spouted faithfully.

“You would be wrong again. The fact that his legacy was spun out of control by his followers is an accident of history, nothing more. I know you believe wholeheartedly that Jesus is your Lord and savior, but

the historical facts are pretty clear. Consider that of the three monotheistic or Abrahamic religions, Christianity is the only one that raised a man to the status of a god.”

“What about Buddhists, they elevated Buddha to a god,” Linda stated thickly.

“Buddhism is not a monotheistic religion. And, Buddha is venerated as an enlightened teacher by his followers, but he is not worshipped as a god. However, within the other two monotheistic faiths, Jews believed that their messiah would be a mortal man, and in the Qur’an, the point was emphasized that Muhammad was only a prophet in order to avoid exactly the kind of deification that was bestowed upon Jesus by his followers after his death. The fact that Christians insist on his divinity is just sad.”

“If Jesus wasn’t the messiah, and we’re all wrong, then why was he arrested and crucified?” Linda pressed on.

“Because he was stirring up trouble at Passover and the Jewish Temple priests, the Sadducees, needed to stifle any potential unrest before Jesus inflamed a mob. If the Temple priests had not acted swiftly and decisively, then the Roman authorities would have been forced to intervene on their behalf, potentially stripping them of their privileged positions for not dealing with the situation. The very fact that Pilate was even in Jerusalem with troops at the time, when he normally resided in Caesarea on the coast, was an indication that Passover was a time when trouble could break out with so many pilgrims flooding into the city from the countryside.

“Whether Jesus actually overturned tables in the Temple or not, he obviously did something that drew the attention of the authorities. His act was probably a relatively minor symbolic gesture, as he wasn’t arrested on the spot by the Temple guards. Here’s an interesting fact that casts a spotlight on the hypocrisy of the Temple, do you know why Jesus was enraged by the moneychangers?”

Linda was the first to volunteer an answer, stating, “Because the Temple is no place for petty commerce, and it was a profanation of the Holy of Holies.”

“Close, but not quite; though, profaning the Temple is correct, just not for the right reason. The priests only accepted payment for the Temple tax in Tyrian shekels, coins minted in the city of Tyre which bore the graven image of the Canaanite god, Baal.”

“Why would they do such a blasphemous thing?” a clearly flustered Linda inquired.

“Because religions, then and now, are nothing but pragmatic when it comes to money. When it comes to cold, hard cash, principles take a backseat; especially since the Tyrian shekels were pure silver and money talks. As the priests refused to accept any other currency for the tax but Tyrian coinage, the moneychangers became a necessary evil to exchange for the silver that the priests would accept. Hypocritical? Indeed. Jesus should have been angry with the Sadducees for this blatant sacrilege—which I am sure he was—but you can’t speak truth to power and live, so he vented on the easy targets of the currency traders.

“However, his message of the destruction of the Temple—when viewed in light of his overall apocalyptic message of the coming of the Kingdom of God, when a center of worship would no longer be needed—would have been particularly threatening to the power and control of the ruling class of Temple priests who were the ones that had him arrested, tried, and executed by the Romans.”

“What about his claim that he was the king of the Jews?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“That is where things get interesting, because in *none* of his teachings does he *ever* refer to himself in this regard, as either a king or the messiah. Both Professors Ehrman and Sanders make the point that in his public ministry Jesus never claimed titles for himself, and that many other preachers made the same claims of being a messiah. And Professor Collins wrote, ‘Many scholars have argued that the attribution of divine titles to Jesus was part of what Harnack called “the acute Hellenization of Christianity,” and a movement away from Jewish notions of messianism.’ In any case, claiming to be a messiah was not considered blasphemous by Jews.

“However, if we note that Jesus says the twelve disciples would rule over the twelve tribes of Israel in the coming Kingdom of God, as stated in Matthew 19:28, then where did Jesus fit into this grand plan? Professor Ehrman hypothesizes that here, in the private teachings to his inner circle, is where Jesus claimed to be the king of the Jews. His disciples would be judges over the twelve tribes, but he would rule over them as God’s regent on Earth in the new Kingdom. Professor Ehrman went on to state, ‘In *that apocalyptic* sense (and I would say, only in that sense) did Jesus think of himself as the Messiah. He wasn’t a cosmic judge, an authoritative priest, or a military leader. He was the one sent from God to proclaim the good news of the coming Kingdom, who would be the ultimate ruler when the end arrived.’

“Professor Ehrman hypothesized that this inner circle information was what Judas betrayed to the Temple priests, a claim they found so blasphemous that they handed him over to the Romans to be crucified.

In any case, his predictions for the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God, ushered in by Michael the Son of Man, never happened. Nor did his egotistical plans for being the penultimate ruler of God's earthly Kingdom; the most epic of epic fails. For God's sake, his own family thought he was nuts, as noted in Mark 6:3 when his brothers were named: 'And they were offended at him.' In our modern world if any itinerant street corner 'the end is nigh preacher' made such claims that he was going to be God's regent here on Earth, we would say he was filled with delusions of grandeur and ideas above his station, and trot him off to the nearest insane asylum. Yet, you Christians believe this one guy from two thousand years ago wasn't equally crazy.

"One point about the crazy end-of-days ministry of Jesus that gets overlooked, was that it was inherently negative; that this world is evil and needs to pass away. Schweitzer quoted Von Hartmann, who summed it up quite devastatingly, stating:

He had no genius, but a certain talent which, in the complete absence of any sound education, produced in general only moderate results, and was not sufficient to preserve Him from numerous weaknesses and serious errors; at heart a fanatic and a transcendental enthusiast, who in spite of an inborn kindness of disposition hates and despises the world and everything it contains, and holds any interest in it to be injurious to the sole true, transcendental interest; an amiable and modest youth who, through a remarkable concatenation of circumstances arrived at the idea, which was at that time epidemic, that He was Himself the expected Messiah, and in consequence of this met His fate. . . .

. . . At that last cry upon the cross the whole eschatological supersensuous world fell in upon itself in ruins, and there remained as a spiritual reality only that present spiritual world, bound as it is to sense, which Jesus by His all-powerful word had called into being within the world which He contemned. That last cry, with its despairing abandonment of the eschatological future, is His real acceptance of the world.

"We also know, today, that the twelve tribes never really existed, so Jesus was wrong on that point, too. Professor Sanders observed that the selection of twelve disciples was a very deliberate choice, one that is filled with Jewish symbolism, given that:

Those who looked for the restoration of the twelve tribes expected a miracle, since human census-taking would never trace the lost ten tribes. God himself would have to intervene directly in history and reconstitute or re-create the lost tribes. This miracle would result in an earthly kingdom, one in which the land would be divided among the tribes, as it had been centuries before. The future was depicted, as in many other cultures, as a return to the beginning, or to an idealized 'golden age' – not the dissolution of the cosmos.

Jesus seems to have shared this hope: the hope for a miracle that would re-create Israel. The twelve disciples would judge the twelve tribes, and his followers even debated questions of their future rank.

"Okay mister smarty-pants, if you're so sure that everything about Christianity is wrong, then how do you account for the resurrection and the sincere and devout belief of the disciples that Jesus had returned?" Linda asked.

"First, as the concept of resurrection had originally been formulated in Daniel 12 it was neither new, nor unique, to Jesus, developing within Judaism over the preceding two hundred years. In fact, some modern Jewish denominations still believe that they will be resurrected in the messianic age, just as Christians do. Second, I highly doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead. But, not having been there personally, I can only speculate. Which is the more likely scenario: that Jesus was resurrected, or that he's been dead and buried for two thousand years and stories of his miraculous reanimation have been greatly exaggerated? As Occam's razor theorizes, the simplest explanation is usually the most probable. Third, which resurrection sighting are you referring to, as all four Gospels differ distinctly in their narratives? Allow me to go to Schweitzer again for his commentary: 'In dealing with the narratives of the resurrection it is evident that we must distinguish two different strata of legend, an older one, represented by Matthew, which knew only of appearances in Galilee, and a later, in which the Galilaean appearances are excluded in favour of appearances in Jerusalem. In both cases, however, the narratives are mythical. In any attempt to explain

them we are forced on one horn of the dilemma or the other—if the resurrection was real, the death was not real, and vice versa. That the ascension is a myth is self-evident.”

“Then where did the belief in his resurrection come from if it wasn’t true?” Linda queried. “Something obviously happened to truly inspire and motivate the disciples, or they wouldn’t have been so successful in spreading the Gospel of Jesus if they didn’t have the passion of their convictions. The fact that Christianity not only survived, but thrived, and spread throughout the world for the past two thousand years proves the message of the resurrection of Jesus and his holy mission must be true, as God’s will was triumphant.”

“That is a logical fallacy, because correlation doesn’t prove or imply causality. Just because Christianity happened to survive does not mean that God caused it to happen. However, I have no doubt that *something* happened to inspire the disciples, but it is a virtual certainty that they did not see the resurrected Jesus. Yet, Christians base their entire religion, life, beliefs, and bend their mental reasoning around the word of his faithful band of illiterate peasant followers, to whom you have granted the benefit of the doubt. It is a difficult belief to accept, especially when you consider that there are a number of other possible and more reasonable explanations than a zombie Jesus walking around.”

“What other possible explanations?” Mr. Hobbes probed.

“Maybe Jesus had a twin brother, and this was the guy the disciples claimed they saw and mistook him for Jesus.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Linda erupted before she could stop herself.

“You have—no doubt—heard of the disciple, Doubting Thomas, but I bet you didn’t know that in Aramaic Thomas means twin.”

“That doesn’t mean Thomas was the twin of Jesus, he could have been anybody’s twin,” Linda asserted.

“I realize that, but this theory is a far more reasonable explanation than a miraculous resurrection for after-death sightings of Jesus. And, there were traditions in early Christianity that believed Thomas was, in fact, the twin brother of Jesus. As the saying goes, where there is smoke there is fire, and there very well could be a grain of truth behind this legend.

“Or, perhaps the Roman soldiers that were guarding his tomb took the body and moved it to an unmarked grave, preventing the disciples from stealing his remains so that they could claim he had risen. When Mary arrived to wash the body she asked where the body was, only to be told ‘he’s gone.’ The stories of his resurrection could have spiraled out of control from this one simple misunderstanding.”

“You really have too much time on your hands,” Linda said.

“You’re probably right, but let me take a moment to stop and examine this interesting little plot twist. Origen, a third-century Christian theologian, while quoting Celsus, a second-century Greek philosopher, preserved for us the latter’s critical attacks against Christianity in his rebuttal, *Against Celsus*. Celsus wrote, ‘But we must examine this question whether anyone who really died ever rose again with the same body . . . But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or, which is more likely, wanted to impress others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.’”

“Nice, really nice. So, you think Mary was just a hysterical female?” Linda demanded to know, the indignation in her voice obvious to everyone.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I am just repeating what other people have already thought. Maybe you would be more inclined to believe another woman, one who is also a professor of religious studies. Professor Margaret Y. MacDonald, in her provocatively titled book *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman*, wrote:

The mention of a hysterical woman may simply be a general attempt to ridicule the beliefs of a cult which sprang from the foolish imaginings of women. . . . But Celsus’ knowledge of the Christian tradition is substantial enough that it is possible that he was familiar with the important role women play in resurrection accounts, and with the role of Mary of Magdala in particular. . . . If Celsus’ remarks were substantive rather than simply being a stereotypical attempt to chide early Christians, he was asserting that from its inception to his own day, Christianity had been very much a women’s religion.

“This theory—seen from the perspective of its massive historical consequences—that the most important Christian belief sprang from the foolish imaginings of one hysterical woman is totally mind-blowing. Stop

and think about that for a second: billions of people over the past two thousand years have believed devoutly in the delusion of a single woman. The social, political, and military implications that this simple act of faith has had on history truly stagger the imagination.”

“It doesn’t matter what you say about the historical Jesus; I still believe in the resurrection of Christ as a fundamental premise of my Christian faith, and absolutely nothing you can say will change my mind,” Linda professed obstinately. “The Gospel accounts are very clear, and I believe Jesus was raised from the dead.”

“Then you won’t be happy to hear what scholars think about the Gospel accounts, particularly the final passages of Mark where the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples. New Testament experts believe the last twelve verses of the final chapter of Mark were a later addition to the original story; insertions to make this Gospel coincide with the oral tales of resurrection spreading through the early communities and that were common to the other books. Once again, textual analysis of the earliest Greek manuscripts indicates that the Gospel ended with Mark 16:8. The last passage in the original composition would then be, ‘And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they anything to any man; for they were afraid.’ This verse immediately follows the dialogue when the women had been told that Jesus had risen and that they should return to Galilee to find Jesus there, but apparently, they fled in terror and *never* said a word.

“However, this situation just wasn’t kosher for later Christians who, in order to backstop later traditions, wrote—in a different style from the rest of Mark—and inserted the verses for Mark 16:9-20, where Jesus appears to the disciples and scolds them for their lack of faith in believing in his resurrection. It is also from these additional verses, specifically seventeen and eighteen, where Pentecostal churches got their loony ideas about speaking in tongues and snake handling: ‘And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.’

“New Testament scholars also recognize that Christianity is not actually the religion *of* Jesus and his message of the coming Kingdom of God, but a religion based on the belief *about* Jesus and his resurrection. To reinforce this point I will quote from 1 Corinthians 15:12-14 where Paul wrote, ‘Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.’”

Sensing where this was going Linda protested vehemently at this direct challenge to the core tenet of Christianity, “Our faith is not in vain, Jesus died for us and went willingly to the cross for our sins.”

“Oh, I doubt that he went willingly to the cross. I’m sure, if he’d been given the choice, he would have preferred not to be painfully tortured and killed. Particularly, since he fervently believed that God was going to intervene and bring about the Kingdom before the sentence was carried out. It must have come as quite a shock to him when his deepest belief failed to materialize, and the reality finally dawned on him that he was completely wrong as the Romans nailed him to the boards. Sadly, crucifixion would have been one hell of a wake-up call, but unfortunately for him, one that came far too late to save the poor, misguided guy from an agonizing death.”

“It wasn’t a mistake, Jesus was destined to be sacrificed to save humanity,” Linda pleaded devoutly.

“Okay, I have to ask, what is it with religious people and your bloodlust for sacrifices? Sacrifices were a legacy of early beliefs, a leftover from pagan rituals; customs which remained common in Judaism throughout the Second Temple era when animals were slaughtered by the Temple priests for Passover. In Christianity, Jesus became the ultimate scapegoat, known in Hebrew as an azazel. Ironically, Azazel also later became the name of a demon. For those of you not familiar with the origins of this term, a scapegoat was a sacrificial goat that was ritually burdened with the sins of the people and sent off into the desert to die in their place on the Day of Atonement.

“Now surely, if God is the all-powerful being you all believe him to be, he can do whatever he wants and could grant salvation with the snap of a divine finger. God should have no need for elaborate and empty ritualistic displays, so why would he invoke this senseless requirement for Jesus to be sacrificed? It seems rather silly that an omnipotent God would force himself to go to all the extra trouble, hassle, and drastic extremes in the first place of manifesting himself in a human body for the sole purpose of being crucified, simply as a means to grant forgiveness to his own flawed creation. This strikes me as a rather long and overly complicated means to an end. An almighty god forcing himself to jump through unnecessary hoops—only humans could think up such a ridiculous premise.”

“I suppose, when you put it that way,” Mr. Hobbes said, “it does seem really rather absurd. I never thought about it in those terms before, but yes, I see your point as it is a rather convoluted process for God to go through just to forgive the sins of his own creation. You really have given us a lot to think about regarding the traditional beliefs of the historical Jesus,” Mr. Hobbes admitted. “I guess we have all accepted Christian dogma at face value, taking our spiritual leaders at their word and never really scratching beneath the surface.”

“Well, those Christian dogmas were shaped more by the apostle Paul—his personal understanding of Jesus and the interpretations of Paul’s writings by later Church fathers—than by Jesus and his actual message. It was Paul’s radical reinterpretations on the life of Jesus that fundamentally changed Christianity from the religion of Jesus to one that salvation only required a belief in the resurrection; a message which differed significantly from that of the original apostles in the Jerusalem church.

“Just like Jesus, scholars insist that Paul must also be understood within the same context of first-century apocalyptic Judaism, specifically that of the Pharisee tradition. Pharisees shared the apocalyptic expectations common to the Essenes, John the Baptist, and Jesus in the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God and a bodily resurrection. As Professor Ehrman stated in his book *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, ‘Now, if the resurrection was an event that was to happen at the end of the age, what would an apocalypticist such as Paul naturally conclude if he came to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead? He would conclude that the resurrection of the end-of-days had started—which meant he was living at the end of the age, and the whole thing was about to come to a crashing halt. And it was to be brought by Jesus.’

“Did Paul really see a resurrected Jesus in his famous vision? It is highly doubtful. Did he see the twin, Thomas? No one can say for sure. Maybe Paul had an epileptic seizure, or maybe he was stoned out of his mind and the whole experience was just a funky trip. In any case, the message Paul started spreading about the pending Kingdom was certainly attractive to many of the downtrodden in society and why he had some degree of success converting people.”

“How was Paul’s message attractive to people,” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“Think about it; what was life like for the majority of people throughout history? It was mainly a constant struggle just to survive and very few were among the educated elite. For Paul, who believed that the resurrected Jesus was going to usher in the Kingdom in the very near future, his message must have been music to the ears of the suffering masses. No money down, no monthly payments, no contracts. All you have to do, my friend, is just *believe* that Jesus was raised from the dead. When he comes back, any day now, you win the grand prize of an all-expenses-paid vacation to eternal paradise.

“Adding to Professor MacDonald’s point about the early role of women in Christianity, Charles Freeman also described the situation in his book *Egypt, Greece and Rome*. ‘The distinct identity of the early Christian communities and their insistence on welcoming and offering support to all must have been attractive to many who needed protection in a harsh world. Women seem to have made up a large part of the membership of the early communities. . . . An ascetic streak in early Christianity appears to have attracted virgins and widows in particular. It was precisely women of this status who were most marginal in traditional Graeco-Roman society with its focus on marriage and childbearing and so the church offered them a home denied elsewhere.’

“Professor Sanders continued the same thought in his book *Paul*. ‘Many, however, would have heard quite gladly the message that, by being baptized and professing faith in Christ, they would be assured of eternal life. . . . It seems not to have been difficult to get a sizeable number of people to increase their chances of a happy future by joining religions or cults.’ And Professor Ehrman took the gloves off and pulled no punches in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet* when he stated, ‘We know that at a later time Christians were mocked for being attractive to unsophisticated and uneducated children. Christianity was widely thought, then, to be a religion of ignorant nobodies.’”

“I resent that hateful description of early Christians being portrayed as mindless fools, duped into believing the message of our Lord and savior,” a visibly upset Linda pouted.

“These opinions were not invented by New Testament scholars in the twentieth century. This perception goes back to the very earliest days of Christianity, and if I may quote Celsus again on this issue: ‘Their injunctions are like this. “Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.” By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children.’

“Additionally, as Edward Gibbon wrote in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, volume 1:

The Christian religion, which addressed itself to the whole human race, must consequently collect a far greater number of proselytes from the lower than from the superior ranks of life. . . . That the new sect of Christians was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace, of peasants and mechanics, of boys and women, of beggars and slaves, the last of whom might sometimes introduce the missionaries into the rich and noble families to which they belonged. These obscure teachers (such was the charge of malice and infidelity) are as mute in public as they are loquacious and dogmatical in private. Whilst they cautiously avoid the dangerous encounter of philosophers, they mingle with the rude and illiterate crowd, and insinuate themselves into those minds, whom their age, their sex, or their education, has the best disposed to receive the impression of superstitious terrors.

“Now those quotes, Linda, are one hell of a description and a ringing endorsement of your ancestors who signed you up for a lifetime subscription of blind faith in Christian beliefs.”

“So, you think all those early Christians were stupid?” Linda asked venomously.

“No, I think that those on the margins of society took great comfort in Paul’s message that all they had to do was believe in the resurrection and have faith in Jesus to receive their divine rewards.”

Mr. Hobbes jumped into the discussion and asked a clarifying question. “But, if the original message of Jesus was different from what Paul preached, then what were Paul’s actual teachings?”

“The Pauline ideology, the one that ultimately came to dominate Christianity, was different in that Paul stressed a belief in the resurrection of Jesus over everything else. Charles Freeman has an interesting explanation for why Paul went off in his own direction in *The Closing of the Western Mind*:

Paul was always aware of his vulnerability as one who had not known Jesus personally . . . and this may explain why he distanced himself from those who had known Jesus. This “distancing” is very evident. In Galatians (1:11) he goes so far as to emphasize that the “Good News” he preached was “not a human message given by men” but “a revelation of Jesus Christ”; in other words, his knowledge of Jesus has been received directly from revelation rather than through the disciples, a remarkable and telling assertion given that he had had every opportunity to learn directly from them. Moreover, Paul makes a point of stressing that faith in Christ does not involve any kind of identification with Jesus in his life on earth but has validity only in his death and resurrection. Why this particular emphasis? Could it be that as others can speak with much greater authority of Jesus’ life, he feels he has to carve out a distinct area of expertise where he has scope to develop a theology that is not dependent on knowledge of Jesus’ life on earth?

“Paul’s message, just like that of Jesus, had at its heart the apocalyptic expectation of the imminent arrival of the messianic age. When Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:29, ‘But this I say, brethren, the time is short,’ we can see where he is in agreement with Jesus and the disciples on this message. But, in Paul’s view, that would happen when the resurrected Jesus himself would return. As the time was so short, Paul’s teachings do not introduce any major societal changes and why his messages, like those of Jesus, focus on being good to one another in preparation for the return.

“Paul’s interpretations need to be understood in the light of this urgency, such as the issues he covered in his letters to the converted on the topics of marriage, divorce, or chastity. What was the point of getting divorced, or worrying about maintaining celibacy for a lifetime, when Jesus was coming back tomorrow to usher in the end of the world? ‘Don’t worry about leaving that abusive spouse as the situation won’t last long enough for it to matter, so just stick it out.’ This was the essence and basis for all of Paul’s beliefs.

“Therefore, Paul’s instructions were only to be considered as short-term guides and they were *never* meant to be long-term life strategies. This eye-opener must be cold comfort for all the Catholics locked into miserable marriages, too afraid to leave their spouse for fear of summoning some wholly imaginary divine justice upon themselves, by an outdated, and ultimately wrong, belief. And, why the Church in its infinite wisdom only grants annulments, as they pathetically just pretend the marriage—and any children magically created without consummation—never happened. This whole situation is pitifully sad for everyone caught in this unfortunate game of make-believe rationalizations—one that brings unnecessary complications and needless grief to so many lives.

“There is also some scholarly debate regarding whether Paul was a Pharisee or not. He claimed to have been one in Philippians 3, and the author of Luke and Acts echoed this in Acts 23 and 26. Scholars point out that his writings indicate elements of Stoic Greek philosophy, and the Jewish Encyclopedia [noted](#):

Nor is there any indication in Paul’s writings or arguments that he had received the rabbinical training ascribed to him by Christian writers, ancient and modern; least of all could he have acted or written as he did had he been, as is alleged in Acts 22:3, the disciple of Gamaliel I., the mild Hillelite. His quotations from Scripture, which are all taken, directly or from memory, from the Greek version, betray no familiarity with the original Hebrew text. The Hellenistic literature, such as the Book of Wisdom and other Apocrypha, as well as Philo, was the sole source for his eschatological and theological system.

“As I mentioned earlier, the Gospel writers used the Greek Hebrew Bible as their source material, and, here again, Paul did the same. If Paul was indeed a Pharisee, he would have been an expert in Mosaic Law, and he started to use his knowledge to weave together a theology that supported his views on Jesus as the messiah from various prophecies in the Jewish canon. The writings of Paul that were included in the New Testament and used to formulate what came to be Christian dogma, were his attempts to reconcile his devout Jewish faith with those of his newfound belief that Jesus was the promised messiah. As a devout Pharisee, he would have been raised to believe in God’s covenant with Abraham, that all Jewish men should be circumcised and that the people of Israel should follow strict dietary laws. But, now he had to figure out how, through sheer faith in the resurrection of Jesus, that not following the letter of Mosaic Law would provide salvation.

“This radical position is the basis for the conflicts Paul had with Peter and James over his preaching to the Gentiles, as the disciples leading the Jerusalem Church insisted that converts must become Jewish. In his book *Paul*, Professor Sanders explained Paul’s resistance to conversion as follows: ‘Because, if circumcision were necessary to salvation, salvation would come by being Jewish. Christ’s death would not have been necessary.’ This perspective is confirmed in Galatians 2:21, ‘I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.’ Therefore, Paul’s entire theological premise was that God sent Jesus to save the world, and so salvation no longer came from following Mosaic Law. For as he said in Romans 8:4, ‘That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.’

“However, as you may have already guessed, the Christianity you know today doesn’t exactly gel with the original imminent expectations for the earthly arrival of the Kingdom of God, as preached by both Jesus and Paul. Just as Jewish beliefs morphed during the Maccabean revolt into thinking the messianic kingdom came in the next life, so, too, did Christianity undergo the same process of change from expecting an earthly Kingdom to one of an afterlife.” Jeff, summarizing again, read the relevant points from *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*. “Professor Ehrman noted this theological shift in thinking by stating:

Eventually it became clear that the charismatic communities Paul had established were going to be around for the long haul. For any social organization to make it through the long haul, there has to be organization and leadership. In the generation after Paul himself had passed off the scene, his communities developed hierarchical structures in which there were established leaders of the churches. . . .

. . . As Christianity developed, it shifted away from an apocalyptic expectation that there would be a future utopian life here on earth and toward the sense that there would be a future utopian life in heaven. The doctrine of the afterlife—that souls would go to heaven or hell—developed as a kind of deapocalypticized understanding or an originally apocalyptic gospel. When Christians no longer expected Jesus to be returning sometime next week, the emphasis shifted from the kingdom that would arrive in the future to the kingdom that was above.

“*This* is the real beginning of the Christian Church, built upon Paul’s core belief that salvation would come in the afterlife through faith in the resurrection of Jesus. It was this modified belief, as dictated by the emerging organized Church, which was passed down for the past two thousand years, but it was *not* what Jesus or Paul actually preached.”

“How were later Church officials able to change the message so easily?” Mr. Hobbes inquired.

“One of the easiest ways was simply to write in Paul’s name to borrow false authority, often changing or even contradicting what Paul originally said. New Testament scholars dispute that some of the Pauline

Epistles are really Paul's, as they describe situations that arose in Christian communities in the decades and centuries after Paul, and did not reflect the issues he was facing in his ministry."

"What sort of issues?" asked a genuinely curious Mr. Hobbes.

"The best example is probably the role of women in the Church, one that strikes deep at the heart of Vatican doctrine—specifically, their patriarchal and patronizing misogynistic attitudes towards women. I already mentioned that women played a significant part in the early Church, as the original witnesses to the so-called resurrection and as the bulk of the earliest converts, but in *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene* Professor Ehrman sheds even more light on the major role women played:

Paul, for example, allowed women to have significant roles in the churches. In his letter to the Romans, he names a number of highly placed women, including Phoebe, a deacon; Prisca, who promoted the Gentile mission and supported a congregation in her home; and Junia, whom Paul calls "foremost among the apostles" (Romans 16:1, 3-4, 7). In 1 Corinthians he indicates that women played a pivotal role during the church's worship services, for example by their public prayers and prophecies (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). Not so the author of the Pastoral Epistles. Living in a different age, when women's voices were being suppressed and their roles in the church curtailed, this author allows only men to serve as pastors, elders, and deacons. In fact, he explicitly forbids women even to speak aloud in church, telling them to talk only at home and indicating that if they want to be "saved," they need to bear children (1 Timothy 2:11-15)—not a particularly enlightened view, and also not one that Paul shared. Here again we have a case where Paul is remembered in ways that stand at odds with the Paul of history.

"Professor Ehrman provided further deconstruction to these passages in his following book, *Forged*, where he used textual criticism to breakdown the clues pointing to how later writers fraudulently wrote in Paul's name.

In the letter "Paul" gives Timothy instructions pertaining to how to run and organize the church. . . .

. . . Probably the biggest problem with accepting the Pastorals as having come from Paul involves the historical situation that they seem to presuppose. Paul, like Jesus before him, thought he was living at the very end of time. . . .

. . . When problems arose in one of Paul's churches—for example, the church of Corinth, for which we have the best documentation—he wrote to deal with them. . . .

. . . To address these severe problems, Paul appeals to the church as a whole and to the individuals in it. . . .

. . . The one thing Paul does not do is write to the leaders of the church in Corinth and tell them to get their parishioners in order. Why is that? Because there *were* no leaders of the church in Corinth. There were no bishops or deacons. There were no pastors. There was a group of individuals, each of whom had a gift of the Spirit, in this brief time before the end came.

Contrast that with what you have in the Pastorals. Here you do not have individuals endowed by the Spirit working together to form the community. Here you have the pastors Timothy and Titus. You have the church leaders: bishops and deacons. You have hierarchy, structure, organization. That is to say, you have a different historical situation than you had in the days of Paul. . . .

. . . Some Pauline Christians thought that women should be treated as equals and given equal status and authority with men, since Paul did say that "in Christ there is neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28). Other Pauline Christians thought that women were equal with men only "in Christ," by which they meant "in theory," not in social reality. These Christians were keen to tone down Paul's own emphasis on women, and one of them decided to write a set of letters, the Pastorals, that authorized his view in Paul's name.

"Professor Ehrman went on to discuss a forged insertion in Corinthians which contradicts Paul's own words in Romans and elsewhere in Corinthians:

One of the most hurtful passages for the cause of women who want to be active in the Christian church occurs in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Here Paul is recorded as saying:

Let the women in the churches keep silent. For it is not permitted for them to speak; instead let them be submissive, just as the law itself says. If they wish to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

. . . These verses are very much like what one reads in one of the Pauline letters that is *not* authentic, 1 Timothy. . . . But just as 1 Timothy is forged, so too has this passage in 1 Corinthians been falsified. These verses in chapter 14 were not written by Paul. Someone added them to the passage later, after the letter had been placed in circulation.

Scholars have adduced many reasons for this view. For one thing, the verses seem to intrude in the passage in which they are found. Immediately before these verses Paul is talking about prophecy in the church; immediately afterwards he is talking about prophecy. But this passage on women interrupts the flow of the argument. Take them out, and it flows much better.

Even more, it is hard to believe that Paul would tell women that they could not speak in church here in 1 Corinthians 14, when just three chapters earlier he indicated that they could indeed do so. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul urges women who pray and prophesy in church to do so only with veils on their heads. If they were allowed to speak in chapter 11, how could they be told not to speak in chapter 14?

“Sadly, because of these later Pauline forgers, Paul earned the unfortunate and undeserved reputation of being oppressive to women: a forged ideology which many churches continue to use today in their misplaced justification for the subjugation and repression of women; particularly evangelicals and their views on gender roles. Paul—like Deuteronomy and the Qur’an—all gave rights and better protection to women than they had in their respective societies, only to see those advances later erased by men eager to use the religion for control.

“Additionally, Paul’s attempts to reconcile Judaism with his apocalyptic Christology led to the Christian institutionalization of Jewish anti-Semitism. Theologians, citing Paul’s insistence that following Mosaic Laws did not lead to salvation, used this as the basis for their arguments that Paul had rejected Judaism. It was primarily Martin Luther, through his warped interpretations of Paul’s letters, who had one of the biggest influences on later Western theologians. This belief, unfortunately, shaped much of the anti-Semitic attitudes that evolved after the Protestant Reformation and impacted the relations between Christians and Jews in European society. It is only the recent scholarship of people like Professor Sanders that corrected the false interpretations that Paul had rejected his own people, by looking at Paul’s rationalizations when framed within his own time and context as a thoroughly apocalyptic Jew, like Jesus.”

Jeff finally came to the end of the background history and wrapped up his deconstruction of New Testament fictions. “So, from humble origins are wildly embellished legends born. The Jesus that Christians proclaim to know, as told to them in their churches by preachers who themselves have been fed the same propaganda, is a carefully constructed literary characterization. The historical Jesus is so far removed from the idealized reconstruction of his real life as to be almost entirely unrecognizable. I’m sorry to have to be so blunt, but from a purely historical and factual point—and New Testament scholars overwhelmingly concur on these facts—Christians have gotten everything completely mixed up. To sum up, once again I will quote Schweitzer’s cutting honesty; and remember as you hear this, that this was a dedicated Christian saying this: ‘In general, however, “the theologians of the present day skim lightly over the eschatological material in the Gospels because it does not chime in with their views, and assign to the coming of Christ upon the clouds quite a different purpose from that which it bears in the teaching of Christ and His apostles.” Inasmuch as the non-fulfillment of its eschatology is not admitted, our Christianity rests upon a fraud.’”

“Okay, if I give you the benefit of the doubt,” said Linda trying to come to terms with what she had learned about Jesus, “that he really was an apocalyptic prophet with a message that we should love our neighbors in preparation for the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, that doesn’t change how his story has positively impacted the lives of so many people. If believing in Jesus brings people happiness and helps them to be good to one another, is that not a good thing, especially if it brings a measure of hope and comfort to the needy in the world?”

“Yes, I am sure the stories of Jesus as just a kind, gentle, loving man—and not a raving, prejudiced, fire and brimstone false prophet—were well-meaning by their original creators, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And, you can’t say faith in the make-believe is harmless just because it brings a measure of spiritual solace and comfort to some, as many people have been tortured and killed in the name of that faith. A faith that still causes division and judgmental attitudes today, even between other Christian sects.”

“So, are you saying that all of the people who have had a spiritual encounter, who have been witness to the power of Christ and felt it deeply in their hearts, were deceived?” Linda asked, with a mortified expression on her face.

“All spiritual comfort aside, your hereditary religious beliefs and the stories they were founded upon are mythological inventions. Surely, that is not something to base your entire life around.”

“But, what about the power of Jesus that has touched countless lives in the past two thousand years?” Linda pleaded desperately.

“I have no doubts whatsoever that these people experienced something powerful and that they felt a profound impact, but it wasn’t in their hearts, nor was it Jesus. Most likely it was nothing more than people giving themselves a case of the warm fuzzies while thinking about their loving God; a biochemical reaction in the brain, a joyful sensation of self-induced positive reinforcement of an imaginary spiritual nature.”

“Are you trying to say that the entire human history of religious belief is all in our minds?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up, but scientists refer to it as neurotheology. In his book *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*, research psychologist Jesse Bering contemplated:

What if I were to tell you that God’s mental states, too, were all in your mind? That God, like a tiny speck floating at the edge of your cornea producing the image of a hazy, out-of-reach orb accompanying your every turn, was in fact a psychological illusion, a sort of evolved blemish etched onto the core cognitive substrate of your brain? It may feel as if there is something grander out there . . . watching, knowing, caring. Perhaps even judging. But, in fact, that’s just your overactive theory of mind. In reality, there is only the air you breathe.

Linda scoffed, “What proof do scientists have that when I feel the hand of Jesus guiding my life that it is all in my mind?”

“Linda, have you ever heard of an M.R.I., or magnetic resonance imaging?”

“Sure, I watch *Shepherd’s Scalpel*, starring Mel Gibson as the doctor who guides lost souls back onto the path of righteousness, healing his patients through the power of God’s word and the laying on of hands.”

“Okay then,” Jeff said rolling his eyes, “at least you know what an M.R.I. is, so we’re off to a running start. Dr. Andrew Newberg, a medical doctor, neuroscientist, and the author of *Principles of Neurotheology*, noted how the brain scans of religious people and atheists thinking about God exhibit noticeable differences. The regions of the brain that light up when devout believers have their religious experiences fail to activate when people like me think about God. That is very indicative evidence that those ‘touched by the hand of God’ feelings believers experience are caused by their own imaginations. When the faithful think about God and his love for them, their own brains switch on and give them those self-reinforcing feelings; like when we think of kittens, or our mother’s love. But, for atheists like me, our brains go ‘yeah, whatever’ and that is why neuroscientists are theorizing that the belief in God is merely an internal psychological response.”

“How do you know those neurological responses aren’t God?” Linda asserted.

“You can’t prove that it is God and I can’t prove that it’s not. But, just like marijuana produces a calming high, the electrochemical reaction in our brains from a religious experience also gives rise to feelings of euphoria. The fact remains that both experiences are induced reactions. We restrict access to alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, and other mind-altering substances, so we should also do the same with religion. Just because the neurochemical reaction in the brain is naturally occurring, does not mean that it should go unregulated. People should be protected from themselves; or, at least, society should be protected from other people’s mental delusions.

“Speaking of psychological reactions, how about all the damage that belief in Christianity and its scare tactics of hellfire and damnation have caused; concepts like Satan as evil incarnate lurking around every corner that took off and evolved in the later Church teachings. I don’t know what Church father first formulated the concept that those who don’t believe are condemned to an eternity in hell, but I wish

someone had given him a much-needed hug. Whatever repressed moron first dreamt up this idea, certainly did not do Western society any favors.”

“Hang on, Jeff. On that note, I think we should break for lunch and pick up this change in topic again after we come back,” Mr. Hobbes said cheerfully and dismissed the class.

Chapter 6:

Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we call it the word of a Demon, than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my own part, I sincerely detest it as I detest everything that is cruel.

Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*

General Rigidson's Residence, Washington D.C. . . .

A suspiciously masculine woman lay exhausted face down on the bed, when a ringing phone stirs her out of her daydream.

"Hello, General Rigidson's home.— Who am I? I'm the general's private secretary, Ms. Knott.— Why am I at the general's residence? We are going over some important papers during lunch in preparation for his afternoon briefing at the Pentagon.— Is the general available? No, I'm afraid he is indisposed at the moment. Can I take a message?— What's that you say, it's a national emergency? One second, let me interrupt him, please hold. Puck, darling? Puck, it's the Situation Room on the phone, they say it's important."

"Well, what do they want," rasped a gravelly voice from the bathroom.

"I don't know, they didn't say, just that it was a national emergency. Hold on sugar pants, I'll ask. Yes, hello?— Yes, this is Ms. Knott; the general wants to know what this is about . . . yes . . . yes . . . I see. Hold on, I'll tell him. Puck, bunny, they said it's something about a General Rimmer out in San Francisco. They say General Rimmer scrambled his fighters, something about him issuing orders for Attack Plan R."

A big, teddy bear of a man emerged from the bathroom. Puck, a nickname he earned in high school from his portrayal of his favorite literary character—the knavish sprite in the school production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "Attack Plan R? That's queer. Let me have the phone my little twig-n'-berry. This is General Rigidson. What's the situation?— What? You're joking!— It's not a joke?— Well, how long ago?— That long, huh? Okay, you better send a car to pick me up and take me to the White House. Thanks for calling. Have a nice day."

"What is it, Puck, can you stay and play?"

"I'm sorry, but we need to dress and go. I need to get to the White House, pronto. I'll make this up to you later. A Broadway show, some new outfits, whatever, but I need to hustle, baby."

Temporarily appeased, Ms. Knott rolled off the rumpled sheets, tucked herself in and proceeded to get dressed.

Chapter 7:

I believe, though I do not comprehend, and I hold by faith what I cannot grasp with the mind.
Saint Bernard

New Testament Class, Second Act . . .

Jeff and a few of his classmates were seated around a picnic table, shaded by the trees that dot the school grounds while enjoying their lunches and engrossed in animated discussions.

“Jeff, you really need to tone it down in there,” said a concerned classmate.

“Why? Have I said anything that wasn’t true or backed up by historical evidence?”

“Well, no, not that I know of, but you sure are going to town on religion. You sound almost as fundamentalist in your anti-religious sentiments as some of our more spiritually zealous classmates. And you sure are hammering Linda,” he declared, as the teenage boys paused to consider that mental image, and then they roared with laughter at the phrasing.

When the giggling and sexual banter had subsided, Jeff jumped to his feet and said, “Time to get back to our next B.S. class.” Once again, the boys broke out into fits of uncontrollable laughter at the double entendre so applicable to their Bible study classes. The students straggled back into class and reluctantly took their seats for the afternoon session, praying the school day would come to a swift and merciful end.

Mr. Hobbes immediately turned the floor back over to Jeff. “Okay, Jeff, before lunch you were starting to tell us about hell and eternal damnation, please continue.”

“Thanks, Mr. Hobbes. It is probably best to first understand where the ideas of hell and satanic punishment originally came from, and how the Christians became so obsessed with sin and the insane concepts it spawned that go along with it. We will start at the beginning and move forward as the ideas of evil progressed and evolved. Would anyone care to tell me where Satan first shows up in the Bible?”

“When Satan tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden,” Linda proposed.

“It’s always the woman’s fault in the Bible, isn’t it? If that isn’t enough proof that it was written by men, and not God, then I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Always the comedian; what’s your point, funny man?” Linda asked.

“My point is that the serpent in Genesis 3 is not Satan.

“Yes, it is,” Linda insisted.

“No, it’s not. For starters, the story of the Garden is not even original to the Jews. The Garden narrative came from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as did the story of Noah. In another example of syncretic borrowing from the Sumerians, the Jewish writers took this tale and put their own spin on it, changing several key aspects. They did keep three very distinct motifs that were all taken from this much older story: a plant of rejuvenation, or the Tree of Life as it was rebranded in the Hebrew Bible; the serpent; and the detailed description of it slithering upon its belly. But, they did change three other significant aspects: making the garden the domain of humans, transforming a goddess into a human temptress who caused the downfall of man, and making the serpent an agent of insubordination to God’s plan. Joseph Campbell explained the original story in *The Power of Myth*:

Now the snake in most cultures is given a positive interpretation. . . . The serpent represents the power of life engaged in the field of time, and of death, yet eternally alive. . . .

. . . The serpent, who dies and is resurrected, shedding its skin and renewing its life, is the lord of the central tree, where time and eternity come together. . . . The Garden is the serpent’s place. It is an old, old story. We have Sumerian seals from as early as 3500 B.C. showing the serpent and the tree and the goddess, with the goddess giving the fruit of life to a visiting male.

“Second, the association between the serpent and the character of Satan did not occur until *hundreds* of years after the book of Genesis was written. Satan *never* appears fully materialized as the ultimate personification of evil *anywhere* in the Hebrew Bible, not once. I defy anyone to find me a reference where he does. According to the authors of *The Birth of Satan*—both of whom are theology professors at Christian universities if you want to dispute these facts— ‘The identification of the serpent in Genesis 3 with the Devil, although without any foundation in the original story, emerged in the final centuries before the common era. . . . Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is there any identification made between the serpent and the Devil/Satan.’

“The Intertestamental Period is the description for the two-hundred-year era between the composition of the last Hebrew book, Daniel, and the first Christian testaments, Paul’s letters, that spans roughly 167 BCE to 50 CE. As end-times beliefs gathered momentum during the two centuries before the time of Jesus, several apocalyptic writings, such as those collected by the Dead Sea Scrolls community, began appearing. The new apocalyptic views that emerged in the book of Daniel also inspired other sources, such as *The Similitudes of Enoch* and *4 Ezra*, where I noted the Son of Man imagery also appears. This genre of apocalyptic writings is categorized as pseudepigrapha, extra-biblical writings that were not included in the Hebrew scriptures.

“The new ideas put forth within these apocalyptic stories started to spread and were accepted into the beliefs of the numerous sects of Judaism that were multiplying at the time, including the Pharisees, the Essenes, and obviously, by Jesus and his followers. While these books were not included in the canon of scripture, they did influence Jewish theology in other ways. It was in these apocalyptic writings where bizarre tales about the hierarchies of angels and the scheming manipulations of demonic plots on mankind first took off in Jewish thought, around the first century CE. Interestingly, all these new concepts—an afterlife, resurrection, and the on-going battles between angels and demons of the contemporary literature—were rejected outright by the Sadducees, the Temple priests, as I mentioned in the Old Testament class. They possibly rejected these new ideas because these beliefs provided alternatives to the people that were independent of, and a challenge to, the hereditary role of the priests as heavenly gatekeepers through their monopoly on ritual sacrifices. However, the Pharisees ultimately rose to prominence after the Temple was destroyed and the priests were no more, granting these beliefs longevity.

“It was only during the Intertestamental Period where the literary character of Satan emerged as a full-blown evil character when a multitude of texts appeared. Therefore, Satan couldn’t have been the serpent in Genesis, because the concept of a separate, evil entity had yet to evolve within Judaism at the time when the creation narrative was inserted by priestly redactors. In fact, there is only a single reference in the entire Old Testament to Satan as an independent being; and it doesn’t come until the very end of the Hebrew order, in *1 Chronicles* 21:1, where it stated: ‘And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel.’ There are two extremely interesting plot twists to note about this verse, and once again I will let the biblical scholars make the relevant points.

“For the first point, I will return to *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* for an explanation of how this verse compares to *2 Samuel* 24:1, ‘And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.’ Professor Collins wrote, ‘Much of the Chronicler’s History can be seen to derive from biblical materials, especially from *2 Samuel* and *1-2 Kings*. While he may have had occasional access to independent historical information, the great bulk of the cases where he departs from the Deuteronomistic History can be explained by his theological and ideological preferences. *Chronicles* describes history as the author thought it should have been.’

“For the second point, let’s go back to *The Birth of Satan*:

Why does the author (or authors) of *Chronicles* change the instigator of the census from God to Satan? The Chronicler is retelling Israel’s history—including a rehash of the story in *2 Samuel* 24—through the lens of his own theology and at a later date. The Chronicler rewrites the events and “updates” them. For example, we know that the Chronicler is concerned with the rehabilitation of David, whom he presents not as the politically brilliant but flawed king of *Samuel* and *Kings*, but as a sort of priestly leader who establishes Jerusalem as the center of worship. . . .

. . . Hence, in the Chronicler’s tale, *it is not Yhwh but Satan* who orders the census, and when Joab . . . fails to complete the census, Yhwh’s subsequent wrath seems justified. . . . Moreover, by assigning blame to Satan, the Chronicler, in a stroke of sheer genius, is able both to preserve David’s integrity and keep Yhwh’s reputation unblemished.

Finally, we observe the Chronicler’s use of the designation “Satan,” minus the definite article (this is not *hassatan*, but *Satan*). For the first time in the canonical Hebrew Bible, “Satan” appears as a proper noun. It is as if Satan is stepping from the shadowy ranks of the heavenly host at the back of the stage . . . to emerge front and center as a character in his own right. Satan—no longer God’s lackey as in the book of *Job*—stands alone in *Chronicles*, acting apart from the divine council. . . . In other words, the cosmic personality split seems well underway.

“Fascinating,” interjected Mr. Hobbes. “I never realized that Satan was conspicuously absent in the Old Testament, except for that single reference. What’s this about hassatan and Job, though?”

“Hang on, we’ll get there. Let’s go one story at a time, and we’re just about done with the Genesis 3 confusion of combining the serpent and Satan. I just need to tie it all together now. It wasn’t until long after Daniel had been written that we see Satan retroactively attributed as the serpent, following the explosion of extra-biblical writings. It was in the New Testament, and not until the very *last* book, Revelation, where Satan made his first, and only, appearance in all his demonic horror with the direct association to Genesis 3. Allow me to illustrate by reading Revelation 12:9. ‘And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.’ And also from Revelation 20:2: ‘And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years.’ It is *only* here, in the final chapters of the New Testament, where there is *any* reference to the serpent and Satan being one and the same.

“What about the story of Job?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“That’s a good question, as this book contains what is probably one of the most well-known and thoroughly misappropriated examples of how Satan was portrayed. Again, the whole issue comes back to original meanings and modern translations. The word used in the original Hebrew was hassatan, which is not a common name but an article, *the* satan, which means *the* obstacle, or *the* adversary. Take note of Job 1:6-7, where hassatan was just minding his own business and was not bothering anyone: ‘Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them. And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.’

“It was God who unleashed the adversary in verses eight to twelve, setting hassatan upon Job and instigating these wholly unnecessary, downright egotistical, and entirely arbitrary tests of Job. Hassatan—the poor, misunderstood, angelic scapegoat abused in the book of Job—wasn’t acting independently at all, but was quite clearly the tool of his master, requiring divine permission to act. Surely your God is above such displays of petty, human shortcomings. But, that’s just my opinion, I could be wrong,” Jeff added, scornfully.

“According to *The Birth of Satan*, ‘The poetry in the book of Job hints at the existential frustrations inherent in a monotheistic faith.’ Those frustrations being that in a monotheistic world where there is only one God, and he is ultimately responsible for everything, the existence of evil in the world causes a paradox known as theodicy. The faithful can’t very well point the finger of blame at the big boss in the sky for all the problems plaguing creation, so it became convenient to lay all the blame on hassatan. The ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, summed up this paradox rather succinctly. ‘Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then where does evil come from? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?’

“The other monotheistic religions that grew out of Judaism—Christianity and Islam—adopted the same concept for a satanic scapegoat. Earlier, in the Old Testament studies class, I mentioned how Judaism borrowed the concept of dual natures from Persian Zoroastrianism. Jews absorbed the beliefs of a separate, evil entity into their own religion and this idea took on a life of its own. In other pagan or polytheistic religions, there were gods associated with violence, destruction, sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but they were not considered evil in the Christian sense, and the absence of a devil figure is common within these belief systems. But, once the claim was made that there was only one all-powerful God, then the problems started, as then a justification for the presence of evil in the world needed to be found.

“It was only in the post-exile Second Temple era, after being influenced by Zoroastrianism, where we can see the character of Satan begin to evolve in the Writings. However, Satan was still not the fully developed evil incarnation created during the Intertestamental Period; the era of paranoid fears and wicked influences lurking around every corner. An atmosphere that was ripe for apocalyptic Jewish—and later Christian converts—to project their anxiety-filled interpretations onto the easiest target, and pin the blame on Satan for all their fears.”

“What about the war in heaven between the angels and demons, when Satan fell from God’s grace in Isaiah?” Linda asked.

“The fall of Satan is not in Isaiah, nor anywhere else in the Old Testament. As I just finished telling you, the whole idea of angels and demons battling each other is not in the Hebrew Bible, but only in the pseudepigraphal books of the Intertestamental Period.”

“Then how do you explain this description from Isaiah 14:12: ‘How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!’?” Linda queried in a futile attempt to press her argument again.

“As I’ve said repeatedly, understanding the Bible properly is all about context. In what context was that verse in Isaiah written?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted again.

“Exactly, you don’t know. Yet, you know, with absolute certainty, that it must refer to Satan and his celestial daddy kicking him out of the house. You should read the whole story in Isaiah 14 and find out what it’s about, instead of just assuming it’s about the fall of Satan based on a single verse.”

“Why?” she challenged.

“Just do it. Do you really want me to tell you or would you prefer to read it for yourself? I suspect you might be more inclined to believe the facts if they come straight out of the Bible instead of from me.”

“Okay, okay,” she sighed. “Where should I start?”

“Read verse four,” Jeff instructed. After a few seconds passed in silence he added, “Out loud.”

“Oh, sorry. ‘That thou shalt take up this proverb against the king of Babylon, and say, how hath the oppressor ceased! The golden city ceased!’”

“There you go, Isaiah was writing about Babylon during the exile. Verse twelve is a reference to the defeat of their Babylonian oppressors at the hands of the Persians, and not to Lucifer being booted out of heaven.” Blank stares all around the room greeted Jeff’s gaze. Somewhere, he thought, villages all over the world must be missing their idiots. Simplifying the plot, he dumbed it down and tried again. “The fall narrative that superstitious Christians attribute to Satan has absolutely *nothing* at all to do with fallen angels and demonic hordes. It was simply the Israelites mocking the Babylonian king for getting his just deserts.

“Further, as I mentioned in the last class, Isaiah 14 is in the middle of chapters one to thirty-nine, known as 1 Isaiah, which dealt with the Assyrians.”

“So what?” Linda challenged.

“So, what empire did you just read about?”

“The Babylonians.”

“Exactly. So, once again, scholars have their suspicions about the legitimacy of this entry—as they do with Isaiah 11—as it’s entirely out of place within the context of the subject matter in the surrounding chapters. The fall of Satan was not described in Isaiah, but comes from two first-century CE pseudepigraphal books, known as the Life of Adam and Eve, and 2 Enoch. Scholars think it first appeared in the Life of Adam and Eve, but the story was popular enough to be copied at least three more times. It was added to 2 Enoch, Revelation 12:7-9, and it even made it into the Qur’an at 2:34. Later, this mythical fall was further rooted in Western popular culture by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

“If Isaiah 14 isn’t about the fall of Satan, then how did this association come about?” Mr. Hobbes asked, genuinely curious.

“You remember Origen and the hysterical female from our previous class?”

Rolling her eyes, Linda answered, “Yes.”

“You can thank him for this, too. It was Origen who in his book, *On the First Principles*, combined Isaiah 14 with Luke 10:18, which he quoted at the end, and [wrote](#):

Again, we are taught as follows by the prophet Isaiah regarding another opposing power. . . . Most evidently by these words is he shown to have fallen from heaven, who formerly was Lucifer, and who used to arise in the morning. For if, as some think, he was a nature of darkness, how is Lucifer said to have existed before? Or how could he arise in the morning, who had in himself nothing of the light? Nay, even the Saviour Himself teaches us, saying of the devil, “Behold, I see Satan fallen from heaven like lightning.”

“The fall of Satan was not, and it would be impossible for it to be, included in the Hebrew Bible—despite what Christians want to believe—as no other books were added to the Jewish canon after Daniel was written in 167 BCE, and the story of Satan’s disobedience and subsequent fall did not arise in the apocalyptic literature until at least two hundred years later. It would be another anachronism for the fall of Satan to have been included *anywhere* in the Hebrew Bible, as it only appears in the Christian New Testament passages of Luke 10 and Revelation 12, written almost three hundred years after Daniel.

“The situation fueling the apocalyptic beliefs that became embedded in the extra-biblical writings—and later Christian traditions—which embellished the story of Satan, his minions, and hell during the

Intertestamental Period, evolved as a way for Jews to make sense of their lot in life; and in reaction to the increasing ideological Jewish factionalism and the corresponding political tension between these different groups. Given their scriptures said they were the chosen people, how could they define what had happened to them throughout their history? Eureka! It must have been that there were evil forces at work in the world, an evil that God was using as a tool to punish them for failing to strictly adhere to Mosaic Law.

“This punishment was interpreted in light of their being forced into humiliating subjugation at the hands of one foreign power after another. For over seven hundred years the Jews were under the domination of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, the Greeks, then later Rome’s control through their client-king, Herod and his spawn, and finally direct rule by a Roman prefect. These political masters called the shots in the Promised Land, while the Jewish faithful increasingly chafed at their situation, desperately waiting for the messianic heir to wipe out their enemies. It was during the time of the Roman occupation that apocalyptic ideas, and their associated writings, reached a climax. It was only at this time—just two thousand years ago—that Satan became the source of all the ills befalling the world, and specifically responsible for the suffering of the Jewish people.”

“Cool,” Mr. Hobbes intoned, intrigued by the diabolical story behind the story.

Jeff continued on, “Jewish writers at this time began using a style known as a *roman à clef*—a French word for a ‘novel with a key,’ which is a literary device used to masquerade a harsh truth behind a fictional story. *Citizen Kane* is an example of a *roman à clef*, where the life of William Randolph Hearst was depicted in a loosely fictionalized manner, but without explicitly portraying the character as the real public figure it was based on. Many stories in the Bible are examples of a *roman à clef*, as it was a very subtle and clever way for an author to take a shot at his enemies, whether religious or political, and still keep his head on his shoulders.

“If you wanted to criticize or disparage the Romans, and you didn’t want to end up nailed to a cross for your opinions, you disguised your writing as a fictional satanic battle, pitting good against evil. The people inside your community will understand the meaning, but your foreign oppressors will just think what a quaint science fantasy story. Casting an oppressor in the role of evil incarnate became the most convenient way of slinging mud. Or, to put it in modern terms, it was the ancient version of negative campaign attack ads. However, those old rivalries and original contexts were lost on later generations, who started to read these tales of longing for freedom and justice through their revisionist perspectives. These later readers then gave the nether-worldly attributes and meanings in the stories a reality that was never the intent of the original authors. Consequently, the stories took on a wholly different meaning of actual—well, imagined—satanic plots.

“For example, whenever Paul mentioned Satan in his letters—the authentic ones, not the later forged ones, where, among other things, the authors disparaged women—it was always used as a political epithet directed at anyone who disagreed with his theological interpretations, including the original disciples. Let me quote from *The Birth of Satan* on Paul’s derision in 2 Corinthians 11.

When Paul chooses to use the word “Satan” he has one particular role in mind: Satan as obstructor. Specifically, Paul uses “Satan” to refer to those who hinder—usually through undermining Paul’s teaching—the fully realized existence that the Christian experience offers. . . .

. . . The second mention of Satan is in reference to Paul’s detractors, the so-called “super-apostles” who seek to denigrate Paul’s ministry. . . . So great is Paul’s disdain for these rival apostles, in fact, that he accuses these ambassadors of Christ of being ministers of Satan.

“The problem with the satanic reinterpretation of these writings was that now every gullible sucker was off and running. There was no turning back once the stories were set in motion and their embellished legends snowballed out of control, merging with the other corrupted doctrines about Jesus and his teachings, to become the lie that Christianity has evolved into.”

“Christianity is not a lie!” Linda stormed.

“Yeah, sure it’s not. Christianity teaches exactly the same message that nice, little Jewish boy from Galilee preached two thousand years ago, with nothing lost in translation, or altered one bit.”

“Christianity is as God intended it to be,” Linda proclaimed stubbornly.

“Wow, you really are one mixed up, ditzy fundamentalist . . . wait, that’s redundant.”

“I’m not the one that is mixed up. I *know* the truth. It is *you* that has been deceived by Satan into believing these false teachings.”

“Right. Well, seeing as I know Satan is a literary character, and since I would not be more deceived by one fictional character than I would be by Lord Voldemort, I may as well press on. Moving from Satan’s fictional origins to his subterranean headquarters, the concept of hell is also completely lacking in the Hebrew Bible. Hell, as a place of eternal punishment and torment, does not exist at all in the original canon. As written in *The Birth of Satan*, ‘There is no hell in the Hebrew Bible. The proverbial pit of fire where sinners are tortured for all eternity is absent.’

“What about the places in the Old Testament where sheol is mentioned?” Mr. Hobbes asked.

“The places where it is listed, sheol is just simply named as a place but not one that is associated with torment for the wicked, as in Deuteronomy 32:22, ‘For a fire is kindled by my anger, and burns to the depths of Sheol; it devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.’ It also depends on which version of the Bible people are using, whether it’s listed as sheol, hell, or a more generic term, like pit. Once again, it is only in the writings of the Intertestamental Period where this concept was expanded upon.

“The idea of hell was spawned from Gehenna, the imagined gateway to the underworld. Gehenna was a perpetually burning garbage dump outside the city walls of Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom—from which Gehenna is a variant pronunciation—where child sacrifices used to be held. This tainted location eventually came to be known as the expected destination for sinners.”

“What are you talking about? The Israelites never practiced child sacrifice; that’s preposterous,” Linda protested.

“Hello, anyone home? Ever hear of Abraham trying to barbecue his son, Isaac?”

“Big deal, one reference to an *attempted* sacrifice that God stopped; that doesn’t prove your point.”

“Well, as I do so love to prove my points by kicking your clueless butt into the next Sabbath, shall we look up a few more biblical references—seeing as you’re unconvinced? Shall we go in order again? We can skip Genesis 22 as we’ve already covered Abraham’s tailgate party. Let’s start with Exodus 22:29. ‘Thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits, and of thy liquors: the firstborn of thy sons shalt thou give unto me.’ Now to be fair, the editors of the good book thought this might be a bit too much for the faithful to swallow, so they inserted an escape clause at Exodus 34:19-20 that stated: ‘All that openeth the matrix is mine; and every firstling among thy cattle, whether ox or sheep, that is male. But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb: and if thou redeem him not, then shalt thou break his neck. All the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem. And none shall appear before me empty.’”

“There you go, Jeff, you’re wrong again. There were no sacrifices, as that verse saves the firstborn sons.”

“O, ye of little faith. Hold on sister, I’m only getting warmed up—just like the kiddies on the barbecue spit. Next, let’s move to Judges 11:30-31, ‘And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.’ Sadly, the poor, dumb bastard put his foot in his proverbial mouth, as his only daughter came running out the door to greet her daddy on his homecoming. I sense your growing dread and your fears are not misplaced. I’m sure that you know exactly what’s coming next, given the doctrinal whooping you’ve been getting all day. Let’s put you and the poor girl out of your collective miseries by picking up at verse thirty-nine. ‘And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed.’ Alas, this time God didn’t prevent the sacrifice of an innocent child to soothe his galactic-sized inferiority complex by telling dear old dad to stop at the last moment, now did he?”

Linda failed to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth and simply stared at the top of her desk in defeat. Jeff picked up where he left off saying, “Thankfully, there were those who spoke out against this barbaric and superstitious practice, like Josiah with his reformation program, and the prophet Jeremiah who condemned child sacrifice at the altar of Tophet in Ge Hinnom, or Gehenna. During the reforms, the shrines to other gods were destroyed and Josiah ‘defiled Tophet, which is in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech,’ as written in 2 Kings 23:10.

“Molech was the Canaanite deity to whom children were sacrificed, and there are numerous references to ‘passing through fire’ in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. While Molech is never explicitly linked to Satan in the Hebrew Bible, there are parallels between the two figures, in that both are represented as supernatural deities and both have associations with fire.

“Continuing on, let’s read from Jeremiah 7:31-32 and see what he had to say on the subject of Gehenna. ‘And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart. Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be called Tophet, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter: for they shall bury in Tophet, till there be no place.’”

“You can stop now. You’ve made your point,” Linda conceded, sadly. “Those examples are horrible; I don’t want to hear anymore,” Linda exclaimed, truly shocked and horrified at the barbarity of the ancients.

“I do get a kick out of using your own book against you. There is something almost poetic about using the Bible against itself. However, to be fair, many other prophets like Jeremiah spoke out against sacrificial practices in general, not just of children. Though, I am sure the child sacrifice, in particular, disturbed them a great deal. Allow me to read a few passages to highlight their view on the utterly futile nature of sacrifices, and which matters were truly more important. Starting with Isaiah 1:11-17:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

“See, doesn’t that sound reasonable? Forget sacrifices and just do what you can to help the less fortunate with good works. That is a religion I might have been able to support, but look at all the mythological crap we got instead. It is too bad no one listened to Isaiah, for his radically sane ideas didn’t catch on and the message had to be repeated in Jeremiah 6:20. ‘To what purpose cometh there to me incense from Sheba, and the sweet cane from a far country? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me.’

“Sadly, the superstitious believers didn’t listen to Jeremiah either, because apparently Hosea, Amos, and Micah had to keep reminding them. From Hosea 6:6 it reads, ‘For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.’ From Amos 5:21-23, ‘I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.’ Finally, from Micah 6:6-8, ‘Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?’

“It also seems the Temple priests self-servingly ignored the prophets of their own scriptures. I guess the priests simply didn’t care, despite the pleas and sharp criticisms from their respected prophets, that all this spilling of blood was counterproductive to the moral tenets of their religion. A morality that included justice and mercy, which was at odds with the cruel, delusional, and selfish thinking that sacrificing animals or children would transfer the stains of their own sins to others in order for them to get a clean slate.

“So, Linda, I trust I have shown you enough evidence to convince you that the concept of hell arose from the Jewish legends about a burning garbage dump and former site of child sacrifice. Not only is hell the product of the frenzied nightmares of control freaks with overactive imaginations, but it is totally absent from the Hebrew Bible and it is *only* mentioned in the New Testament, where it is not even referred to as hell.”

“Yes, it is,” Linda challenged yet again.

“In your English versions, yes, but in the original manuscripts, the word used was Gehenna or the Greek equivalent, Hades. Hell is a Germanic word, derived from the name of an underworld goddess in Norse mythology, which was used in our English translations. Just a quick detour through history to highlight my

point: the first major work to be printed with movable type was the Gutenberg Bible, created on a printing press invented in Germany. So, you do the math why a Germanic word for the underworld entered our collective over-imaginings. Yet, once again, important clues and meanings get lost in translation, since Gehenna would have been instantly recognizable to the early apocalyptic Jewish-Christians as the dumping ground of Jerusalem and all it symbolically implied—the portal to the underworld realm of sheol.

“Moving into the New Testament references, neither Paul nor John say anything about hell in their writings. There are only a handful of references to hell as a place of punishment and torment, and the majority of those are in the book of Matthew, where Matthew 5:22-30 and 18:9 are merely echoes of Mark 9:43-48. You all know that quote popular among fire and brimstone Christians, say it along with me: pluck out your eyes or cut off your hands, lest your whole body should be cast into hell. What lovely imagery. These are the earliest and first indications that first-century zealots began to believe in hell as a real place for punishment, which doesn’t show up until some thirty-plus years after Jesus and another fifteen or twenty years after Paul.

“Matthew was writing in a community persecuted by the Pharisees for their distorted Jewish beliefs, and his writings warn of the punishment awaiting anyone who rejects salvation through Jesus. Like a broken record, Matthew, repeatedly, mentioned those not saved will be cast into fire, with lots of wailing and gnashing of teeth. Additionally, Matthew contains the *only* reference in the *entirety* of the Gospels to Satan residing in hell. From Matthew 25:41, ‘Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.’ That’s it; no other links between Satan and hell exist in the Gospels.

“Luke 16:22-24 contains the single depiction in this Gospel to the imagined tormenting flames of hell, but a certain devilish someone is conspicuously absent. Come on, I’ll give you three guesses who isn’t there. No takers? Aww, you guys are no fun. Maybe Satan was off on a recruiting trip for souls when Luke wrote about hell, and so he just assumed there was no resident caretaker.

“But, have no fear. Just because Satan isn’t present in Luke’s hell doesn’t mean the fun is over. In the most self-righteous and sadistic aspect of Luke’s description of hell, he paints a picture that Thomas Aquinas would repeat over a thousand years later with his own plentiful brand of monotonous and sanctimonious rubbish. In Luke and Tommy’s warped minds, saintly souls would get to spend an eternity in heaven floating around on puffy clouds, delighting in the torment of the non-faithful, as they looked down their angelic noses on the stupid bastards roasting their naughty bits in hell, saying ‘I told you so.’

“That revenge fantasy alone screams volumes about the fragile, wounded psyches of the holier-than-thou crowd. It is too bad psychoanalysis didn’t exist way back then, as these fantasies, provoked by impotent rage, are all very Freudian. If only Luke and Tommy hadn’t thought up this nonsense in the first place, think of the hundreds of millions of people over the past two millennia that could have been saved from the self-inflicted mental cruelty this kind of thinking breeds. Maybe those two just didn’t play well with others. Instead, they projected their resentment at being outcasts onto everyone around them, concocting mental fantasies of hellish retribution, rather than having a healthy outlet for their issues—like getting laid.”

“Jeff!” Mr. Hobbes admonished, “That is highly inappropriate.”

“Why is it inappropriate? Christianity has a long and unstable history of sexual repression, and smothering natural sexual urges manifests itself in any number of ways. If you look at one of the common themes in medieval diabolic literature, the thread of sexual repression is extremely evident. How many tales did people create to explain away erotic dreams, their in-built human pressure valve to release pent-up sexual tension? ‘Of course, reverend, it must have been a demon, a male incubus or female succubus, having sex with me. It couldn’t have been my subconscious simply letting go of this abnormal state of mind.’ Sex is a primal urge and it’s fun! Why would your God give us these natural impulses, only to have us deny them to prove our devotion? Those are the demands of a petty, sadistic tyrant, not an enlightened deity, and ones that more accurately reflect the insecurities and twisted morality of an uptight and repressed clergy.”

Conceding the fair point, Mr. Hobbes urged Jeff to press on. “Please try to be respectful of your classmates, and confine yourself to the historical analysis.”

“No problem. A few years after Aquinas, Dante added further fuel to the fire and brimstone in his *Divine Comedy*. Though, in Dante’s *Inferno*, fire does not play much of a role, as only the seventh and eighth circles of hell mention fire; contrary to the widely held, but mistaken, public perception. Ironically, the center of Dante’s hell was made of ice, where the Devil was entombed. It was a few centuries later, in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where the Devil was cast into a fiery lake.

“Further, the imagery normally associated with Satan is merely borrowed from other cultures. As many of the older Canaanite and pagan gods of surrounding cultures would have been viewed as threats to the worship of the one God, these gods and their associated imagery were personified as evil incarnations. Neptune’s trident is Satan’s pitchfork. And you remember Seth, who killed his brother Osiris in the Egyptian creation story, from him we got the forked tail and red skin. Pan, a Greek deity renowned for his eroticism and lusts, was symbolized as having the horns and legs of a goat. All these characteristic images became associated with Satan, as Christianity spread around the Mediterranean through pagan cultures. Throw in Baal with his horns and you get another demon with satanic imagery, as in Baal Zebub, or Beelzebub.

“There is also Baal’s archenemy, Mot, who reputedly dwells in an underworld pit, like someone else you all imagine and fear. In fact, Satan also shares Mot’s residence with Ahriman, the dark lord of Persian myth; and Hades, the Greek god of the underworld. In all these belief systems the underworld was a place where souls were sent to be judged, a common factor that was key to incorporating the pagan beliefs of others into this Christian insanity.

“It should be evident by now that the hell Christians *think* they know is a completely fictional, synthesized compilation of varying beliefs. And, in keeping with the best traditions of religious mythology, the authors of these legends rarely demonstrated any original creativity, but simply ripped off the ideas from others and passed them off as their own.”

“So, you’re saying the concept of hell is a later invention of Judeo-Christian beliefs? Mr. Hobbes inquired.

“That is exactly what I’m saying. And I am not the only one; even members of the ministry say it, too. Back in 2006, a retired American bishop of the Anglican church, named John Spong, did an interview with Keith Morrison on NBC’s news series, *Dateline*, where he raised a few eyebrows with his frank admissions about the Christian Church and its imaginary threats:

Spong: I don’t think hell exists. I happen to believe in life after death, but I don’t think it’s got a thing to do with reward and punishment. Religion is always in the control business, and that’s something people don’t really understand. It’s in the guilt-producing, control business. And if you have heaven as a place where you’re rewarded for your goodness, and hell is a place where you’re punished for your evil, then you sort of have control of the population. And so they create this fiery place, which has quite literally scared the hell out of a lot of people throughout Christian history. And it’s part of a control tactic.

Morrison: But wait a minute. You’re saying that hell, the idea of a place under the Earth or somewhere where you’re tormented for an eternity, is actually an invention of the Church?

Spong: I think the Church fired its furnaces hotter than anybody else. But I think there’s a sense in most religious life of reward and punishment in some form. The Church doesn’t like for people to grow up, because you can’t control grown-ups. That’s why we talk about being born-again. When you’re born-again, you’re still a child. People don’t need to be born-again, they need to grow up. They need to accept their responsibility for themselves and the world.

“Ironically, in March 2018, Pope Francis seemed to have inadvertently admitted this inconvenient truth of the Church, when, supposedly, in an interview with an Italian journalist, he claimed that there was no hell; though the Vatican immediately went into damage control and put out a statement that the pope would never utter such ridiculous heresy. However, one cardinal pulled out a useful doctrinal loophole from the Vatican’s casuistic bag of tricks, and was honest enough to [state](#) that, ‘There’s nowhere in Catholic teaching that actually says any one person is in hell.’

Never one to be convinced, Linda continued the challenge. “Okay, mister atheist, if you’re so sure there is no Satan, then why is there so much evil in the world? Why are there so many bad people that steal and murder?”

“Maybe, because some people are just assholes and it’s nothing more complex than that.”

“Ha! The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist, and it sure looks like he fooled you.”

“Isn’t Keyser Söze a great character? I’ve seen *The Usual Suspects*, too, and I can recite movie quotes and spout empty platitudes all day long, just as easily as you can. Frankly, my dear, the Devil is just a figment of the superstitious imagination, and I don’t give a damn.

“Why should I care in the first place? The ideas of Satan and hell have nothing to do with reality, and especially not in our modern world. The apocalyptic literature written in and around the time of Jesus, detailing Satan’s nefarious doings and the imminent can of whoop-ass he was about to receive, was written for communities that were being persecuted or suffering in some way. The stories were meant to give hope to the righteous that those who inflicted bad things on them would be punished, eventually. Essentially, the idea of eternal punishment for the wicked was the product of religious *schadenfreude*—the smug, self-righteous satisfaction that the downtrodden envisioned as spiritual revenge when their tormentors got what was coming to them. Or in other words, Satan and the concept of hell was just a Judeo-Christian form of karmic punishment for those who mocked and tormented believers for their insane beliefs. Therefore, I say unto you: what, me worry? Why bother? Satan doesn’t exist.”

“I guess you’ll find out when you get what’s so obviously coming to you on your day of judgment,” Linda predicted.

“Linda, I couldn’t care less about your paranoid, narrow-minded concepts of ever-present lurking evil and fear of damnation. I choose to think for myself and am not held mentally hostage by ancient superstitions of a fiery netherworld. You know, now that I think about it, maybe hell is that last spark of conscious energy right before we fall into the abyss of nothingness. Maybe hell is that moment when people realize they’ve wasted their lives believing in supernatural nonsense, cloistered in churches and secluded in constant prayer. Hell might be the dawning comprehension that they threw away their one and only chance to immerse themselves in the pleasures of the world and savor all that life has to offer. Maybe that moment seems to stretch on for eternity until the light blinks out forever. Maybe that is the hellish suffering poets, painters, and writers have attempted to capture from time immemorial. If there is a God, surely the greatest sin is failing to suck all the marrow out of creation during our brief and fleeting existence, by deliberately denying ourselves the chance to really experience life in some misplaced sense of devotional sacrifice.”

Several students, looking visibly uncomfortable at such an outright denunciation of their deeply held beliefs, shifted slightly away from this apostle of the Antichrist, lest they should be struck by the impending bolt of lightning. Linda herself was too aghast to muster her usual feeble replies and apologetics, while she sat there too stunned to do anything but blink vacantly.

“The Christian message of love and mercy has inspired many to lead ethical and moral lives, which has impacted history and changed the course of Western civilization—if we ignore the Crusades, Inquisition, and other assorted atrocities, of course. But, why should those core messages be wrapped in dogmatic lies and enforced by fear of eternal damnation? We don’t need religious institutions ordering us to suppress our intellects in deference to their self-appointed moral authority. We don’t need to be led by those who abuse their positions of power by scaring the gullible into submission with bedtime stories of imaginary evil lurking under the bed.”

Finally, Mr. Hobbes interceded and put an end to the diatribe on hell. “Wow, Jeff, you have certainly given me a *lot* to think about today.”

“There is nothing wrong with thinking. More people should try it. If they did, there might be fewer frustrations in life caused by needless human stupidity. Sadly, though, I’m not done yet.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Linda taunted.

“Well, maybe because Christian doctrine gives me so much material to work with, that’s why. Just when I think fundamentalists can’t get any more bizarre, they go and prove me wrong. As with the Christian obsession in all things sinful, fundamentalists go completely overboard with their beliefs in the always delayed, yet eagerly awaited, second coming. And, tied in with that, is your zealous belief in the rapture, when ye of so much faith get snatched up, leaving the wicked disbelievers behind to pay the piper for failing to listen to your rantings and ravings before the end-times. You do realize . . . wait, stupid question. Surely you don’t realize, so I better spell it out for you in simple words. The entire rapture insanity was based on a single verse from one of Paul’s letters, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which stated: ‘Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.’ All the subsequent ensuing hysteria derives from this one, obscure, isolated passage that was probably written after Paul partook of a heavy night indulging in the communion wine.

“Further, Paul makes absolutely zero reference to the tribulation that you millennial maniacs think will follow the rapture after your angelic butts are plucked safely out of harm’s way. Correspondingly, Revelation 20:1-7, the only passage that mentions the supposed millennial rule of Jesus, makes absolutely no mention of the rapture. So, from a strict reading of Revelation, which you fundamentalists are fond of, your ass is grass, because y’all ain’t going nowhere. I bet you didn’t know that did you, that the rapture and

the tribulation are mutually exclusive references in your source material? You probably thought, like everything else, that it was all nicely written down in one consistent, neatly packaged prophecy—and you’d be wrong. The only way to get the story that’s been concocted by fundamentalist doomsday fanatics is to smash together different sections of the Bible—which someone apparently did—to come up with this twisted fairy tale. So, which is it, rapture or tribulation? You can’t have both according to your precious book.”

“Why can’t we have both? Just because the references are in two separate books doesn’t mean they both can’t happen.” Linda paused to think about the question for a second, and then answered, “I suppose, if forced to choose, that before Jesus does return the tribulation is more likely to happen, as he will usher in the new Kingdom of God after weeding out the good from the bad.”

“Hang on a second, are you admitting the whole, overblown hyped concept of the rapture, and that your master of retribution porn, Tim LaHaye, is wrong? Wow, someone get Ripley’s on the phone, because no one would believe that a fundamentalist would turn their back on one of their own. By the way, what was it with the fundamentalist obsession in 2000, so convinced were you that the end was nigh? Why 2000, why not any particular year? Do you think God’s into round numbers or something, like he’s got nothing better to do with his time than play numerological games? After all, it was only 2000 in the Christian calendar, not in any other culture.”

“Obviously, because our calendar is based on Jesus, that’s why,” Linda declared.

“Well, given that 2000 came and went without any rapture or supernatural phenomena whatsoever, I’d say that you guys got your panties in a twist over nothing. People have been claiming God will come each generation to smite evildoers, but it has been thousands of years, so where the hell is he? He’s awfully late to his own party.”

“God doesn’t work on human time, perhaps to him two thousand years is but a brief flicker. As it is written in 2 Peter 3:8, ‘But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.’”

“That’s a convenient non-answer, isn’t it? You guys have a fragrant rationalization for every obstacle. So, what you’re saying is that space daddy is indifferent to the suffering of billions of people, millennia after millennia, because our timescale is unimportant in his grand scheme? Gee, that sounds great. Where do I sign up for this faith in a delinquent, absentee landlord?”

“Blasphemer!” Linda roared.

“Oooh, I’m so scared. I’d be worried about being condemned for blasphemy if I actually believed in your hocus pocus. Since I don’t, hurling empty curses at me is entirely meaningless. As is trying to scare me with something I don’t believe in, but I guess that subtle point is beyond your comprehension. So, moving on, if you are ready to admit that the rapture is a total load of crap, can I move on to what sparked so much bizarre psychosis in the first place, the book of Revelation?”

“Could I stop you even if I wanted to?”

“Um . . . probably not. I’m kind of like a fundamentalist that way, like one of you ringing doorbells on Saturday morning. Once you let me get started, I’ll keep on spreading the good news—whether you want me to shut up or not.”

“Wonderful,” Linda replied sarcastically.

“Isn’t it? Right, where was I? Oh yeah, Revelation and all it’s not cracked up to be, at least not the way it has come to be known in the collective Christian consciousness. The book of Revelation is *not*, I will repeat that for the slow learners among us, not a tale of the end-times when God and Satan do battle. What’s that word I’ve been harping on all day?”

“Context,” Mr. Hobbes volunteered.

“You would be correct. Like all the other passages in the Bible, the various authors had specific agendas or issues they were trying to address, and in the case of Revelation, it was a coded or veiled attack on the Roman Empire. Just like Daniel was aimed at tearing a strip off the Greeks without them knowing it, Revelation is also another example of a roman à clef. The author of Revelation used phrasing and symbolism his audience would have been familiar with, disguising his points in an apocalyptic story. Scholars believe this literary attack was written by John of Patmos, not the John of the twelve disciples or of the Gospel that was attributed to him, but another John living on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Turkey.”

“Tradition says it was the disciple John who wrote both the Gospel and Revelation,” Mr. Hobbes offered.

“Traditions say a lot of things, that doesn’t mean they are correct.”

“Says you,” Linda blurted out immaturity.

“Say many experts that know a hell of a lot more than both you and I do,” Jeff retorted in kind. “Let’s also not forget that the disciple John was a poor, illiterate fisherman, so where did he learn to write these two vastly different books?”

“Who said he was illiterate?” Linda challenged.

“For one, most people at that time in history were illiterate, as we discussed earlier about the appeal of Christianity to the masses. And if you don’t want to take my word for it, would you believe the author of Luke and Acts? Acts 4:13 stated it explicitly: ‘Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled.’ Compounding the illiteracy, was the fact the author of the Gospel of John displayed a grasp of sophisticated Greek philosophy; something an Aramaic-speaking Galilean fisherman would be extremely unlikely to have possessed. Let me illustrate with a quote from Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which highlighted the completely foreign manner of thought and speech in the Gospel of John:

John represents a more advanced stage of the mythopoeic process, inasmuch as he has substituted for the Jewish Messianic conception, the Greek metaphysical conception of the Divine Sonship, and, on the basis of his acquaintance with the Alexandrian Logos doctrine, even makes Jesus apply to Himself the Greek speculative conception of pre-existence. . . .

. . . Here is a man who . . . appears in a character which gives no hint of a coming spiritual metamorphosis, one, moreover, who . . . was chosen, along with James and Peter . . . as an apostle of the Jews—“how is it possible,” asks Weisse, “to explain and make it intelligible, that a man of these antecedents displays in his thought and speech, in fact in his whole mental attitude, a thoroughly Hellenistic stamp? How came he, the beloved disciple, who, according to this very Gospel which bears his name, was admitted more intimately than any other into the confidence of Jesus, how came he to clothe his Master in this foreign garb of Hellenistic speculation, and to attribute to Him this alien manner of speech?”

“Well, John had many years to learn how to read and write in Greek,” Linda pressed her claim.

“Give it up, Linda; you are grasping at straws. John of Patmos was a different guy, in a different place, writing at the time of another crackdown. This time it was under Emperor Domitian, around 95 CE, and John of Patmos was addressing his story to the early churches of Asia Minor. These communities were facing persecution for refusing to worship the emperor, as Domitian was trying to establish a cult dedicated to himself, which the Christians would have obviously found sacrilegious. The second and third chapters of Revelation specifically list which churches he was writing to, and he spells out in detail the troubles they are encountering at the hands of the Romans and the local Jewish populations, who saw the Christians as a sect of insane nutjobs who were preaching a corrupted form of Judaism.

“John’s message to them was not to be led astray by agents of Satan intent on deceiving them, but to stand firm in their beliefs and they would be rewarded for their faith. The whole first half of the book of Revelation, from chapters one through eleven, is a condemnation against anyone who criticizes them for their weird and cultish ways, casting all their detractors as—you guessed it—Satan. It’s rather odd, don’t you think, that throughout religious history anyone who dares to disagree with established authority is branded a heretic or a satanic minion? I sense a pattern emerging here.”

“What makes you so sure you’re right in this interpretation and Christians are wrong?” Linda inquired.

“Okay, if you won’t trust me, then how about from the pope himself?”

“Excuse me?” Linda queried in a baffled manner.

“You’re excused. Though, there really is no excuse for such blatant ignorance about the religious doctrines that seem to be of such utmost importance to so many in the world, but I’ll let it slide—for now. In 2006, before a general audience at the Vatican on August 23, Pope Benedict XVI [said](#), and I quote, ‘The seer of Patmos, identified with the apostle, is granted a series of visions meant to reassure the Christians of Asia amid the persecutions and trials of the end of the first century.’ Is that definitive enough for you, and from a source of sufficient religious authority?”

“I guess so, but I still want to check with my minister for confirmation and make sure you aren’t trying to deceive us with false evidence or mistaken interpretations.”

“You mean using mistaken interpretations as the fundamentalists do? Yeah, you go do that. Get back to us with his answer real quick, I’m sure we’re all eager to hear his reasoning.”

“Dickhead,” Linda muttered almost incomprehensibly.

“Heavens, my poor virgin ears have been assaulted! Mr. Hobbes, I protest against this foul-mouthed disciple of disinformation casting unwarranted, scandalous aspersions upon my good character.”

“Spare us your mock indignation, Jeff, you aren’t fooling anyone. Move it along.”

“Fine,” Jeff conceded. “In the last half of Revelation, from chapters twelve to twenty-two, is where we start to see the descriptions of the cosmic battle of Armageddon that we are familiar with in Christian lore, in what has come to be believed will be the final battle between the forces of good and evil. At the risk of repeating myself, this end-times battle scenario was a veiled attack written in the hopes for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, directed to a group of persecuted Christians. The story of Revelation is *not* the bitch-slapping for that upstart, troublemaking Satan, as it has been made out to be.

“Like so much of the material from the Gospels and Pauline letters, the author of Revelation makes numerous references to the Hebrew Bible to beg, borrow, and steal any and all symbolism to tell his story. Most of the material used came from the book of Daniel, which was also written at a time of religious persecution. So, it is no wonder that Revelation is also full of wild tales of retribution. But, why is the book of Daniel so important? First, I need to make a brief diversion to highlight a major detail of the book of Daniel, before returning to explain how this relates to Revelation.

“Just as the first half of Revelation was a directive to stand firm in their faith against a foreign power, the first half of the book of Daniel was also an exemplary tale of a pious man living in the Babylonian exile who was striving to maintain his faith. And, like its predecessor books, Daniel also draws heavily on earlier traditions; in this case, Daniel alluded to Joseph. Daniel and Joseph were both captives in a foreign land, and both rose to positions of great prominence in the courts of their respective kings after successfully interpreting dreams. This was no coincidence, but a very deliberate styling of the story to evoke the collective conscious memories within Jewish biblical lore. There was a common technique in other books of the Hebrew Bible, as it was used by Josiah in order to bolster his credibility as the Davidic heir when he burned the altars of foreign gods, just like the prophets Elijah and Elisha who came before him; and both Josiah and Matthew’s Jesus being compared with Moses.

“The allusions to Joseph in the story of Daniel and the meaning behind it are clear: Israelites suffered in slavery under the Egyptians and God delivered them, just as they suffered under the Babylonians and were delivered. To the Jews suffering under the Greeks during the Maccabean revolt, the message in Daniel was we shall prevail again. The second half of Revelation also deliberately parallels the second half of Daniel, and just like the true nature of the ministry of Jesus, both contain apocalyptic visions.”

“Very interesting,” Mr. Hobbes interjected, and other students in the class, less zealous and more open-minded than Linda, began to nod in agreement.

“Oh, it gets better, trust me. Although I previously covered the Son of Man confusion, and that apocalyptic and resurrection beliefs all have their roots in Daniel, there is still more bizarre shi—” Jeff stopped himself just in time, “—stuff to come out of Daniel.”

“Like what?” Mr. Hobbes asked, genuinely intrigued.

“Like Daniel being the only book to cite an exact prediction for the end-times, down to the day. This has spawned plenty of ensuing hilarity for amused bystanders to watch while one credulous idiot after another has attempted to calculate the date of the apocalypse . . . and been wrong every time. Though, in fairness to the authors from the sacred order of the apocalyptic page-turners, their books have sold millions of copies and raked in tons of money.”

“So, who’s the real credulous idiot, then?” Linda asked snidely, with a holier-than-thou look on her face.

“Ah, well, obviously the slack-jawed flock who buy this crap and hand over their hard-earned money at God’s cash register, both at the bookstore and in church. A fool and their money are soon parted, so it is said and so it shall be, like the endless supply of suckers who send money to one fraudulent televangelist after another demonstrates quite clearly. Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me repeatedly, pull my head out of my behind and beat some sense into me. You’d think gullible parishioners—after being disillusioned by one hypocrite after another—might start to reconsider their misplaced blind faith, rather than jumping right back in with yet another fraudulent crook. But no, people this stupid and sheep-like never learn, so I have no sympathy towards those who so willingly allow themselves to be repeatedly scammed.

“Perhaps, in reciprocal fairness to textbooks that carry a disclaimer about the validity of evolution, televangelist programs and indeed the Bible itself should be prefaced by a warning to viewers: caveat emptor religio taurus excrementum. I can see by the blank looks around the room that you are all in desperate need of a classical education, and not one that is infused with dogmatic brainwashing. Lord

knows, if you continue receiving this religious indoctrination, you will turn into compliant, mindless, and submissive robots; or, to borrow from Ira Levin's famous novel, *Stepford* Christians. Caveat emptor, anyone? No takers? A Latin maxim for 'let the buyer beware,' and the rest you should be able to figure out for yourselves.

"Where was I? Oh yes, Daniel's numerical prophecy. The number used by all these crackpots to calculate the date of God's return is given in Daniel 8:14 and 19, which proclaimed: 'Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed. . . . I will make thee know what shall be in the last end of the indignation: for at the time appointed the end shall be.' For the mathematically challenged among us, two thousand and three hundred days is just under six years and four months, which would have been around 160 BCE, give or a take a few years from the actual date of writing."

"What's so significant about that?" Linda asked, dreading the answer.

"Well, according to this prophetic calculation, we should all have been living in God's paradise one hundred sixty years before Jesus, your beloved messiah, was even born. But, since that obviously didn't and still hasn't happened to this day, the truly insane have been trying different formulas to come up with a date."

"Like who? Can you give us some examples?" Mr. Hobbes asked.

"Sure thing, Mr. Hobbes, as there are several examples to choose from. It may be of great comfort to our saintly schoolmates to know that they aren't alone in their apocalyptic zealotry for the second coming, and that they are in the company of some devout Americans with their own history of religious insanity. One of the most recent, and certainly the one that got the most media attention, was the caravan of deluded souls who quit their jobs and gave up their possessions to trek across the United States, led by their colossally incorrect prophet, Harold Camping, warning everyone that May 21, 2011 was going to be the date and we better all repent.

"Further back in early American history, I'm sure you've all heard of the Seventh-Day Adventists," Jeff asked looking around the room for signs of recognition and continued, "but I bet you don't know their apocalyptic origins. William Miller used the date given in Daniel 8:14 and recalculated that each day, must in his reality, have been a year. Since the big boom hadn't happened yet, Miller used Ezra's return to Jerusalem circa 458 BCE as his starting point and then announced confidently in the 1830s that the merciful end would arrive sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844.

"Now, as I'm sure you've all deduced by the fact that we are all still here talking about it, Miller's prediction failed to come true. Not surprisingly, many in Miller's day also wrote him off as a looney-tune, as in Miller's own words: 'To my astonishment, I found very few who listened with any interest. Occasionally, one would see the force of the evidence, but the great majority passed it by as an idle tale.' Yes, and rightly so they ignored his idle fabrications. So anyway, as 1843 drew nearer, the new Millerite movement grew and spread fear among the incredibly gullible. When March 21, 1844 passed without so much as a trifling thunderstorm to herald the imminent return of Jesus, the calculations started anew and, lo and behold, another date was miraculously announced for the month of April.

"Miller came up with yet another date, October 22, 1844, when the April date also failed to produce even a whiff of anointing oils from the golden mane of Jesus . . .

This is a test of the Evangelical Broadcast System: Jesus was a dark-haired Palestinian Jew, not a white-skinned, blonde-haired Celt, as depicted by European renaissance artists. This has been a test of the Evangelical Broadcast System. If this had been an actual emergency, have no fear, you would have been raptured. We now return to our regularly scheduled deprogramming.

. . . and the October date became known as the day of the Great Disappointment, when, yet again, absolutely nothing happened and the Millerites subsequently evolved into the Seventh-Day Adventists and settled in for a long, depressing wait.

"Additionally, there are other dates quoted in different chapters of Daniel. Chapter nine lists an incoherent rambling mix that supposedly totals four hundred ninety years, and at the end of chapter twelve are two separate dates: one thousand two hundred ninety days and one thousand three hundred thirty-five days. Who knows why Miller used the number given in chapter eight; perhaps he never bothered to read beyond that point, maybe he couldn't do the math in chapter nine, or he just couldn't work out a formula that pointed, conveniently, to the mid-1800s from the two numbers given in chapter twelve.

"In a further kindred relationship with your American fundamentalist forefathers, Miller came from an area of Upstate New York that was christened the 'burned-over district,' due to the frequent havoc created

there by the revivalist movement of the Second Great Awakening in the nineteenth century. Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church, also had his delirious visions of the angel Moroni and the golden tablets here. Which makes one wonder, was there something in the water to have spawned so much fundamentalist hysteria in one place?"

"A handful of guys with bad predictions do not add up to much," Linda stated categorically.

"It's not just a few guys with a few bad predictions. The Jehovah's Witnesses tried and failed with their calculations for the early half of the twentieth century. David Koresh and his band of wackos from Waco—a splinter sect of Branch Davidians, themselves a breakaway sect of the very same Millerite Adventists—lived at Ranch Apocalypse awaiting the galactic fireworks set to begin in 1995, as calculated from the same prophecies in Daniel. I wonder what amended date they would have come up with in 1996 when the expected end came and went without a pop; but I guess the world will never know what goofy new theory they would have had next. Short of recalculating the date, they would have been forced to seriously reevaluate their core beliefs. That is if the F.B.I. hadn't stormed their compound first and helped send them on their way to the afterlife in 1993."

"That's not funny," Linda said, "a lot of people died in that tragedy."

"No, it isn't funny. But, it does prove how easy it is to make up random garbage for religious people to believe and have them follow it blindly into the gun sights, or to the *Kool-Aid* cups, or to the spaceship orbiting behind a comet, or to set out on cross-country caravans, or insert any arbitrary, bone-headed theory as applicable. On the upside, it does remove a lot of stupid people from the gene pool through the process of natural selection. Oh, there I go again, that pesky Darwin popping up again; my bad.

"Let's examine a few more predictions by some of our own homegrown American fundamentalists, shall we? Yes, I think we shall. In the early 1970s, Hal Lindsey predicted Armageddon within forty years of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, surmising we'd all go poof before, or during, 1988. In 1976, Pat Robertson went even further and predicted the actual year of 1982. He then reaffirmed it in 1980, stating categorically for the record on *The 700 Club* that, 'I guarantee you by the end of 1982 there is going to be a judgment on the world.' That was pretty ballsy of the guy. How did he backpedal his way out of that corner in 1983? Maybe we should look that up for our next class assignment. Finally, and always good for a chuckle is Jerry Falwell, who predicted in 1999 that within a decade the Antichrist would pop in and say hi. Well, it's been more than a decade and still no sign of him. Unless you listen to the right-wing dingbats who thought Obama was the Antichrist trying to deceive the world with . . . *universal healthcare!*"

"You can stop now; you've made your point," Linda conceded, sourly.

"Really, my point got through? You are admitting your Jesus cheerleaders who consistently made stupid prophecies of the second coming were wrong?"

"You'll see when Jesus finally does come."

"For argument's sake, let's say you're right. Bring it on, I'm ready. Gimme all you got. The end is long overdue, so let's get it over with and stop all this pussyfooting around. Come on, prove me wrong. Each generation of Christians has hoped for the end, and they've been wrong every time; yet, here we are, still waiting, thousands of years later. So, why am I not worried? Oh Satan, dark master, come forth and show thyself," Jeff invoked in a solemn tone. Then he began rolling his eyes back into his head, while muttering randomly made-up and incomprehensible words—just like some of those charlatan televangelists—as the look of terror in the eyes of some of his classmates amused him.

"Ha-ha, you think you're so funny. Your time of reckoning will come, just you wait," Linda scolded.

"Thanks for so nicely bringing me back to the second half of Revelation and why I won't get a reckoning. Let's start with Revelation 12:1-5 where Satan *finally* begins to emerge as the full-blown, evil incarnate opponent of God:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars. And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.

“Okay, so let’s jump right in and deconstruct this passage. A woman with a crown of stars and a number that keeps showing up throughout the Bible: twelve tribes, twelve disciples, and in this case, twelve stars. What does the number twelve represent in Jewish writings?”

Mr. Hobbes answered, “Traditionally the number twelve symbolized Israel, as descended from the tribes of the sons of Jacob.”

“Right, so what’s the significance of a woman with a crown of twelve stars? Surely, that is not just a random number the author came up with off the top of his head. This passage refers to Israel, along with a cryptic reference to the birth of the messiah who will come to set the people free from foreign oppression. John of Patmos used the woman to symbolize the faithful of Israel and pleaded with them to withstand the persecutions described in the first half of the book. But, after two thousand years of intervening history, thousands of miles distant, and numerous shifts of language and translations, that point has been lost on modern readers. Christians reading these same passages would later reinterpret the woman as Mary, not as Israel, and that she is obviously giving birth to Jesus.”

“Why would John, a Christian, use a symbol for Israel to tell Christians to remain strong in their faith?” Linda asked, for once genuinely interested, given a rapturous subject so near to her heart.

“Don’t forget, early Christians were still considered a sect within Judaism at this time. Although, they were thought of as heretics in the view of the traditional Jews, which is why the Jews were also persecuting them, like the Pharisees. Christianity had not yet fully diverged into a separate and distinct religion, so it would have been perfectly natural for John to use Jewish imagery for the many Jewish-Christian converts.”

“Are you sure? Mr. Hobbes, does this sound right to you?” Linda questioned, struggling to accept this disturbing fact.

“Yes, Linda, as much as it pains you to realize that Christianity started off as a breakaway Jewish cult, sometimes you have to face the uncomfortable truth.”

Linda nodded hesitantly, in grudging consent.

Jeff continued, “Regarding the dragon imagery, this was not Satan attempting to devour the baby Jesus as Mary gave birth. Once again, it was a veiled reference to the hated foreign authority of the Romans. According to this passage from *The Birth of Satan*, which itself makes reference to the author of *Understanding the Apocalypse*:

Wilfrid J. Harrington notes: “In the Jewish tradition, the serpent or dragon symbolized the power of evil, the principle of all the suffering of Israel.” The imagery of the dragon, then, was probably quite familiar to John’s readers. They would have recognized the “ancient serpent” as the liar who deceived Eve in Genesis 3 and the dragon as the “mythological monster of chaos which readily symbolizes the power of evil.” . . .

. . . Other images may have come to the audience’s mind, including the ten-horned monster mentioned in Daniel 7, the Greco-Roman sea monster Hydra, and the legendary Canaanite sea monster Lotan. The beast in Revelation 12, with its horns, tail, and red color, has influenced later depictions of Satan’s physical appearance.

“Here, again, the author of Revelation borrowed imagery directly from Daniel. By using a reference early Jewish converts to Christianity would recognize, John painted Rome and its pagan emperor with a satanic epithet.

“So, now we know what the dragon represents and the influence the book of Daniel had on Revelation,” Jeff declared, “but there is still more to be explained. Revelation 13:1 stated, ‘And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy.’ Compare that with Daniel 7:24: ‘And the ten horns out of this kingdom are ten kings that shall arise: and another shall rise after them; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings.’ That sounds just a wee bit similar. The beast with the multiple heads in Daniel was a reference to the Greek Seleucid dynasty, headed by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and to other previously despised foreign rulers, the Babylonians and the Assyrians, just as the beast in Revelation alluded to the Romans.

“This section of Revelation was a complete rip-off of Daniel, but hey, what else is new in biblical story-telling? Think about it: seven heads on the beast, Rome is known for its seven hills, coincidence? Maybe or maybe not, but the ancient Jewish and early Christian writers certainly knew how to disparage their overlords by taking subtle shots at them, and by the late first century many Jews had now reinterpreted Daniel’s beast as applying to Rome.”

“Okay, so if Rome was symbolized by Satan, what about the mark of the beast?” Linda inquired.

“An excellent question, as the rest of Revelation 13 deals specifically with the Roman emperor, the second beast to be mentioned. Do you remember what I said at the beginning, about the first half of Revelation and why John was addressing his letters to persecuted churches? The Roman emperor, Domitian, was trying to establish a cult for his own worship. This was justifiably causing quite a spiritual dilemma for Christians who were supposed to recognize only one god, the Jewish God. Listen for those clues in Revelation 13:12 and 16-18:

And he exerciseth all the power of the first beast before him, and causeth the earth and them which dwell therein to worship the first beast. . . . And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred threescore and six.

“The mark of the beast has an easy explanation. Again, I defer to the experts from *The Birth of Satan*:

In Revelation 13, a second beast emerges, this time from the earth. This beast has two horns and attempts to enforce emperor worship, which according to John, is equivalent to the worship of Satan. This beast is associated with a false prophet who intentionally leads the faithful astray and is identified cryptically by the number 666. The number 666 plays on the Hebrew numerological significance of seven; if seven signifies completion and perfection and 777 is trebly perfect, then 666 symbolizes a hideously mutating outgrowth of imperfection. The number 666 can also be related to the name of emperor Nero. In Hebrew, letters can be used to represent numbers, and the numerical values of the Hebrew spelling of the Greek title “Neron Caesar” add up to 666.

“As to the mark itself, the original Greek term used in Revelation was charagma, which was the imperial seal used on official documents. This seal granted licenses to merchants and gave them the right to trade. Without this imperial stamp of approval, one couldn’t be a very successful merchant within the Roman Empire, so they either played along paying token lip service to imperial authority, or they stuck to their principles and got left behind.

“Moving on to cover the other chapters, Revelation 14 is like the first half of the book, with messages of reassurance to the persecuted churches to persevere through the dark times until God’s justice brought the idolatrous Romans to their pagan knees. The final battle in Revelation 19 is simply a reimagining of the most common tale in history, that of human conflict; the difference, in this case, was that the tale was set in the cosmic realm with a divine superhero. In the final smackdown of good versus evil, Daniel’s Son of Man was recast as Jesus ‘The Bam-Bam Lamb’ battling that arch-villain, Satan ‘The Sulking Sore Loser.’ Add in the fire and brimstone imagery from Revelation 20, which draws upon the composite sketches and influences of the subterranean netherworld in other cultures, and the stage was set for the Christian concept of hell as described in the final judgment of Satan and all the poor souls he led astray.

“The finale in Revelation 21-22 ushers in the new Kingdom of God, with peace and tranquility on Earth. This is the same Kingdom envisioned by Daniel, Jesus, Paul, the Essenes, the Pharisees, and other apocalyptic Jews of the era, who all believed in a resurrection at the end-times when evil would ultimately be defeated and the righteous could live without fear of persecution from the wicked. It is, when you think about it, a rather appealing world where we can all live without the daily sufferings that have marked humanity’s existence since the dawn of time. But sadly, it is just wishful thinking and the embodiment of the desperate hopes of an impressionable group of superstitious ancient people. A tale that, like others within the Judeo-Christian tradition, also had its roots in the Zoroastrian end-of-days mythology, which was very similar in its ultimate showdown between its dueling dual deities.

“The imminent end, the one that Jesus definitively prophesied within his generation and desperately hoped for by every generation of Christians, has, rather obviously, not happened. Yet, here you fundamentalists are, still eagerly waiting like panting dogs with your fatalistic desire for this world to come to an abrupt end. This life is all we are going to get, and so, on behalf of thinking people the world over, would you please stop wishing and planning for our mutual annihilation. If you want to go, then be off with the lot of you, and Godspeed. But please, stop trying to take the rest of us with you, as we kind of enjoy our time on this festering rock.”

“What makes you so sure the prophecies of Revelation are wrong? Maybe the timing is only delayed,” Linda speculated.

“Well, we could examine the controversies surrounding the inclusion of Revelation at all in the Bible, as argued by several leading church authorities. The canonical nature of this delirious book has always been contested by the likes of the Church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, and by Saint Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and oh yeah, the *entire* Eastern Orthodox Church. Thomas Jefferson removed it completely from his Jefferson Bible. Like a festering sore on the ass of Christianity, Jefferson wrote Revelation off as ‘merely the ravings of a maniac, no more worthy nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams.’ So yes, forgive me if I happen to agree with some of the leading authorities from Christian antiquity who rejected Revelation.

“As our dumb luck would have it, beliefs in Satan and hellish damnation were already going out of vogue within rabbinical Judaism by the time Christians and Muslims, sadly, incorporated these concepts into their respective doctrines. Indeed, Satan has lost the place of evil incarnate he held within late Second Temple Jewish thinking, and he has since been relegated to the trash bin of theological bad ideas, reverting to his original status as an instigator. Just think about how humanity could have potentially avoided this insanity altogether if these paranoid concepts of pervasive evil had already died out before others picked them up and ran with them—to our everlasting regret. We should all weep for the psychological damage these ideas have done to humanity over the past two millennia.

“So, to sum up, the Christian obsessions with the manufactured and entirely fictitious accounts of evil, sin, Satan, hell, Revelation, and so on ad nauseam, are nothing more than the fevered nightmares of our own overactive imaginations. These ideas have no basis in antiquity from the earliest Hebrew sources, from which the Christian tradition arises, and they are simply the product of generations of superstitious nonsense. Let me quote again, using the description from a few sections in *The Birth of Satan*:

Theologically, Satan’s greatest virtue is to serve as the cosmic scapegoat, saving God from blame for evil. . . .

. . . The psychology of all this scapegoating is clear: Satan is a theological coping mechanism, the screen onto which repellent traits about God are projected. . . .

. . . In short, Satan was provisional, Satan was ad hoc. Satan was a convenience and a contrivance, an incomplete idea, an insufficient response to a child’s question about where evil came from, although the story was told so well that it often forestalled its logical follow-up, “But why did and does God allow Satan to rebel and operate and torment?” In the end, the patronizing answers—“Satan is the source of evil,” “The Devil made me do it”—never answer the question of the origins of evil.

“However, if we follow a strict fundamentalist interpretation, then God is responsible for bringing evil into the world by creating Satan in the first place. This is especially applicable since he is supposedly all-knowing and could see the future he was creating, aware that his prodigal son was going to crash the party. By this measure, God is a deadbeat dad. If he was held to the standard of human law, he would be charged with child neglect for bringing us into this world and then leaving us to fend for ourselves—for eons. And to rub salt in our wounds, he condemns us to an eternity of suffering if we fail to live up to his expectations or meet his unreasonably high standards. ‘Gee thanks, dad. I didn’t ask to be born, just so you could take sadistic pleasure in roasting me for an eternity.’ What could be a more twisted theological construct than that? Eternal punishment has got to be a manmade delusion, because it certainly has no place in the heart of the benevolent and loving God you all imagine.

“Tragically, these ideas of evil had their uses in the hands of religious authorities. Just how would one go about keeping the superstitious pagan locals in line after they had been converted? The Church scared the living daylights out of them with tales of hellish torment for a number of imaginary sins. And to prevent them from reverting to their old, pagan ways, the Church intentionally rebranded the local gods and goddesses as evil demons and spirits who would lead the people astray from God. But, with the stick, they also brought the carrot, and so they promised the poor, suffering masses that they would get their rewards in the next life. If, and only if, they followed the one, true path as the priests defined it. Christianity appealed mostly to the poor, to slaves, to women, and to the suffering, precisely because of its all-inclusiveness regardless of education or standing in society. It was exactly these people, these uneducated peasants, who

were the easiest to convert from paganism and then scare into compliance, and why pagan philosophers branded the religion as belonging to a class of ignorant nobodies.

“Throw in some insane ranting from Revelation, along with ideas about the rapture and tribulation, and the Church had the makings for one repressed, scared straight congregation. Witness the birth of a doctrine of terror. A doctrine that Church fathers have used ever since as a means for controlling and tyrannizing people into obeying every intimidating command they uttered, lest the dumb sheep—who didn’t know the priests were making everything up—would pay the ultimate price in the afterlife.

“Seeing as how the Church fathers used fear to scare people into obedience from the earliest days, a tactic which became their standard operating procedure, they eventually started believing their own hype and became completely obsessed with sin, demons, and temptation themselves. This obsession with sin resulted in one of Christianity’s greatest departures from reality, the Seven Deadly Sins.

“In the fourth century, a Christian monk named Evagrius Ponticus, scribbling away in a desert in Egypt, refined and categorized a list of eight temptations. This list came to be known as the Seven Deadly or Cardinal Sins when Pope Gregory the Great revised them two centuries later and they subsequently became immortalized in the Western mind by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. These sins are found nowhere in the Bible, they are an entirely human creation, yet they became a central tenet of faith in the Western Christian mindset, influencing the culture and repressing many generations of the faithful.

“My particularly favorite sin, because of the remarkably primitive attitude that came with it, is sloth. Sloth, which is apathy, despair or melancholy, and which we know today is a medical condition called clinical depression. This hopelessness was—to the intolerant minds of the Church—a deadly sin for which the immortal soul of the sufferer was in eternal jeopardy. Sloth, along with the other sins, also came to be associated with their own unique demons, Belphegor, in the case of this specific affliction. And how does one get rid of all these supposed demons causing all our problems? Why, exorcism of course—another zany adventure brought to you by the superstitious charlatans running the Church.

“However, the sin that has by far had the greatest effect on tortured Christian minds—thoughts consumed by a chaste anguish that has wasted countless lives—is lust. Lust, that most basic and natural of human instincts which the Church, in its insolent wisdom, thinks is ‘holy’ unnatural. The clergy’s obsession with chastity, virginity, sex, or more aptly the lack of sex, and an abhorrence of natural sexual tendencies in general within the early Christian Church, perpetuates itself to this day in Vatican policies regarding birth control and priestly abstinence. Policies which, once again, were neither consistent through time, nor were they universally accepted by many of the Church fathers in the first one thousand years of its history. This is thoroughly demonstrated by the simple fact that there were thirty-nine married popes, including Peter, who the Vatican claimed was the first bishop of Rome.”

“Wow, I bet you must be really unpopular on tours of the Vatican,” Mr. Hobbes joked. “I guess you will only get to see the Sistine Chapel in photos.”

“The truth is rarely popular, especially in religion, where the messengers of truth are usually tortured as heretics for daring to contradict established dogma. While I would someday like to visit places of historical interest from the Roman Empire, seeing the obscene wealth of the Catholic Church displayed in such a tawdry fashion—members of said institution who supposedly take a vow of poverty—would probably fill me with revulsion at such blatant displays of conspicuous preening.

“Ironically, it was this same obsession with chastity that led indirectly to the Vatican’s steady acquisition of such massive quantities of ill-gotten wealth. It is especially ironic since the New Testament itself makes mention of married clergy, such as in 1 Timothy 3:2, ‘A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach.’ Don’t you think that is an interesting choice of words, *a bishop and his wife*? It is an odd reference, given the Vatican’s stated position on unmarried clergy. Interestingly, in July 1993, while attempting to clarify that the intent of a celibate priesthood was so that single priests can better focus on their duties, Pope John Paul II [said](#) that celibacy ‘doesn’t belong to the essence of priesthood.’ So, where did this absurd policy of abstinence come from, when and why?”

“Yes, I am curious to know myself,” chimed in Mr. Hobbes, with nods of assent from several other curious classmates.

“Celibacy was nothing new to the Church, as some, like Paul, chose the lifestyle willingly. It wasn’t until after 1074, with reforms started by Pope Gregory VII, that celibacy started to be enforced for the first time after he published a papal encyclical against married priests. It was only at the Second Lateran [Council](#) in 1139—and specifically, canons 6, 7, and 11—when priestly marriage was prohibited, and the celibate

lifestyle became officially enshrined within the ranks of the Church. But, there was a very specific reason why the Church forbade marriage at this time, and it has nothing to do with chastity, God, or religious piety. The reason for Vatican-sanctioned celibacy was, quite frankly, greed, and the Vatican's desire to keep the land of its clergy and the rents from tenant farmers within their grasp."

"What are you talking about? That's ridiculous," Linda challenged.

"Look it up if you don't believe me. I gave you the council, the year, and the specific canons. And, why is it ridiculous?"

"For starters, what do lands have anything to do with being celibate?"

"Think about it, what happens to all of our stuff when we die?"

"It goes to our family."

"Bingo! What's the best way for keeping property from being divided up and split among heirs, so that it can be kept for the Church?"

"I suppose," she paused while attempting to reconcile the obvious, "by preventing priests from getting married and having kids in the first place."

"And you would be exactly right," Jeff said. "Although, the Vatican claims it was to prevent Church lands from being bequeathed to the families of priests, it had exactly the opposite effect. This pattern of steadily acquiring land was the foundation that provided the bulk of the Vatican's wealth up through the present day. Land—and their loss of it—became a major issue for the Vatican when the new nation of Italy came into existence during the 1860s; a modern Italy born from the unification of independent kingdoms. Pope Pius IX—who had the bad luck of being the one in charge at the time—was not a happy camper when a huge chunk of land in central Italy, known as the Papal States, was confiscated by the new state.

"Why were these lands of the Papal States seized, you may ask? The people of Italy—home-base for the Roman Catholic Church and the breeding grounds for most of the popes for centuries—were fed up with the domination of the Vatican. By 1860, much of the region within the Papal States was in open rebellion and siding with the forces of the king of Sardinia, as the people sought freedom from the medieval rule of the Church. The Italian unification forces had conquered the majority of the Papal States by 1861, leaving the Vatican with only the Latium region immediately around Rome where the forces of the French emperor, Napoleon III, protected Pius IX. When the Franco-Prussian war started in 1870 and the French forces were withdrawn, popular demonstrations urged the new Italian government to move in and seize Rome for their new capital. The pope, self-pityingly, started referring to himself as the prisoner of the Vatican, as he was now contained within the original confines of Vatican City. So, what does that tell you when even Italians were so disgusted by the anachronistic rule of the Roman Catholic hierarchy that they pleaded for violent liberation?

"In response, Pius IX became a total drama queen and threw a colossal temper tantrum over the loss of the Papal States—which had obliterated his little fiefdom of absolute temporal power—and with it his control over the insolent citizens who wanted democratic freedoms. This loss of sovereignty had thrown the papacy into crisis, which must have further enraged an increasingly impotent Pius IX. He went so far as to threaten excommunication for any uppity Italians who dared to vote in free elections, thus defying the Vatican's divine mandate to rule them in perpetuity. So, in 1864 Pius IX issued a controversial eighty-point [hissy fit](#) called the *Syllabus of Errors*, where he ranted on about the erroneousness of things like reason, rationalism, a civilian secular society, and modern liberalism.

"These *evil* ideas had been challenging the authority and influence of the Church since the Reformation, forcing a reluctant papacy to adjust to the realities of the new, modern world—and the Vatican didn't much care for that. Pius IX saved the best material for last though, where he so beautifully demonstrated the close-minded and outdated mentality the Vatican is widely known and criticized for desperately clinging to. Summing up his rant in the *Syllabus of Errors*, he proclaimed that it was an error to think 'the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.' Surely, there is nothing as dangerous as progress in the minds of the Vatican. It's no wonder the Italians were desperate to get out from under the pompous and overcompensating control of the Vatican.

"However, Pius IX wasn't about to be humiliated and relegated to obscurity as an impotent figurehead by taking the loss of his lands lying down. Oh no, he was going to let the world know just how powerful he really was. He would simply [declare](#) his own supreme infallibility, and if you didn't believe it, well, it was his way or the highway—via excommunication. So, in 1869 he called the First Vatican Council, where, conveniently, he had this reactionary doctrine conferred upon himself; but only after he bullied dissenting bishops into submission. I can almost hear him jumping up and down, raging with defiance at the looming

obsolescence of his institution and shrieking hysterically, ‘God damn it, all of you are going to listen to what I tell you . . . whether you want to or not. I’m the pope and you have to believe *everything* I say.’” Jeff bellowed.

“Other negative aspects of the Vatican’s real estate aspirations are demonstrated by the Church’s history in the Philippines, specifically, in what were known as the friar estates. The Spanish brotherhoods that infested the islands with their presence, grabbed up to forty percent of the prime agricultural land for themselves on these estates. These sanctimonious brothers were an idle class of plantation owners who lived off the backs of peasant sharecroppers, leeching rents and taking up to one-third of the crops for themselves. Such behavior was hardly in keeping with their vows of poverty and charity, or their missionary work to convert the natives. This parasitic relationship ultimately played a key role in two revolts of the Filipino’s against the Spanish; one in 1745, and again in 1896 when they finally succeeded in throwing out the Spaniards—only to replace them with the Americans.

“Related to the issue of the Vatican’s enormous wealth in the Philippines, and elsewhere, is their unwillingness to take responsibility, both financial and moral, for the exploding segment of the population that toils in poverty as a result of their policies toward birth control. You would think that with such vast stores of wealth the Church might actually use that money to feed, house, clothe, and educate *every* child that is conceived due to their resistance to birth control and born into a family that can’t afford them. It is only fair—since the Church bears the lion’s share of the blame by continuing to insist that nothing prevent procreation—that they pick up the full tab for *all* these kids and stop dodging their responsibility. And, despite having the billions of dollars with which to help alleviate the situation, the Church spent over a decade actively opposing the Reproductive Health bill which provided for public funds to be used for much-needed sexual education programs, and health initiatives to make condoms available in clinics.”

“How was the Church able to interfere to such a great degree?” Mr. Hobbes wondered aloud.

“Because the bishops exerted their power and tremendous influence over Catholic-indoctrinated legislators, threatening to excommunicate any politician that supported family planning or birth control initiatives as part of the government’s desperate attempts to relieve the poverty crisis. When over one hundred fifty professors from a leading university signed a petition in support of the bill, the Church not only [called](#) on the school administration to fire them, but that there should be an investigation into heresy. The Church’s resistance to these efforts, and all the misery they have inflicted on a poverty-stricken population, is fueled by their blind doctrinal adherence to narrow-minded, misogynistic, and archaic attitudes towards sex.

“Their completely blinded mentality was laid out in *Casti Connubii*, the 1930 papal encyclical that [babbled on](#), at *considerable* length, about ‘the dignity of chaste wedlock.’ Pope Pius XI also saw fit to scold modern women for daring to neglect ‘the burdensome duties properly belonging to a wife as companion and mother (We have already said that this is not an emancipation but a crime); . . . whereby the woman . . . may be at liberty to conduct and administer her own affairs.’ Hey, don’t give me those dirty looks. I didn’t write this, I’m just the messenger. This encyclical also codified the Vatican’s continuing objections to contraception, abortion, and how the wife is expected to get pregnant each and every time the couple—if they *absolutely must*—have sex and are not able to ‘curb evil desires.’

“Their institutional arrogance came shining through when the basics of *Casti Connubii* were reinforced in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of 1968—which also dealt with marital issues and reaffirmed the Vatican’s objection to birth control—when Pope Paul VI [proclaimed](#), ‘No member of the faithful could possibly deny that the Church is competent in her magisterium to interpret the natural moral law. It is in fact indisputable, as our predecessors have many times declared.’ Wow; the audacity just takes your breath away. Seriously, do you think it is possible for them to make a more blatant statement of just how out of touch with reality they really are?

“It does make you wonder, how do celibates think that they are even remotely qualified to issue proclamations on human sexuality? I am especially perplexed at their role when it comes to giving relationship advice to married couples, seeing as they have voluntarily chosen to reject participating in committed relationships and the valuable insights gained from that experience. How can they possibly hope to have a full grasp of the dynamics of marriage? I realize many of them have extensive training as counselors, but there is no substitute for real, hands-on understanding.

“No wonder many educated, Western Catholics just ignore the outdated directives of the emasculated fathers and go about enjoying their personal sex lives, regardless of any imagined future punishments. It’s a shame the faithful in the third world don’t have the same choices, educational awareness, or access to birth

control, which the Church restricts as a condition of their charitable aid. Ironically, the Vatican would not feel compelled to direct such huge amounts of money to these regions if there wasn't an unsustainable population boom that directly results from the Church's dogmatic and dangerous resistance to sexual education and condoms. Although the Vatican appears to be totally clueless to the cause and effect of their policies, and how that impacts the volumes of money they need to continuously pour into places like Africa, I suspect that this is just an act.

"It seems to me that there are two options for directing the efficient use of this very generous financial aid they admittedly pour into third world countries. One, raise a smaller population to a level of self-sufficiency by spending it on education, hospitals, clean drinking water, and infrastructure. Or two, spread those same funds among an exploding population that is deliberately kept breeding—and almost by default, illiterate—diluting the available money to provide only the most basic necessities of life. The Vatican chooses the second option, and by choosing the latter they condemn these unfortunate people to a vicious circle of never-ending poverty. Then again, teaching poor and ignorant Catholics about healthy sexual relations, and allowing them to have condoms, wouldn't be good for the Vatican's long-term business plans—but it explains so much.

"For shame! Isn't the Church supposed to be providing relief for the poor and less fortunate, not breeding an endless supply of them? It almost seems as if Vatican policies are designed to ensure there will always be a population of the needy and illiterate who are kept in a state of perpetual ignorance and oppression by their medieval thinking. Their arguments against birth control are just a nice way to gloss over the truth that lots of Catholic babies equal more faithful contributors to the collection plate. And, that translates into more monetary power for the Church to continue their exploitation.

"Their pigheaded resistance to condoms, especially in the third world, also borders on the criminally negligent and is way beyond morally irresponsible. Sam Harris mentioned this topic in *Letter to a Christian Nation*, where he wrote:

Missionaries in the developing world waste a lot of time and money (not to mention the goodwill of non-Christians) proselytizing to the needy; they spread inaccurate information about contraception and sexually transmitted disease, and they withhold accurate information. While missionaries do many noble things at great risk to themselves, their dogmatism still spreads ignorance and death. By contrast, volunteers for secular organizations like Doctors Without Borders do not waste any time telling people about the virgin birth of Jesus. Nor do they tell people in Sub-Saharan Africa—where nearly four million people die from AIDS every year—that condom use is sinful. Christian missionaries have been known to preach the sinfulness of condom use in villages where no other information about condoms is available. This kind of piety is genocidal.

"Jeff, I think you are ignoring the support and comfort the Church and members of many religious faiths genuinely try to provide to people in need," Mr. Hobbes defended sincerely.

"I don't deny that, and I willingly grant that point. But, it is also rather insulting that some of the religious faithful believe they have a monopoly on charitable kindness and claim the moral high ground, as if secular humanists are some kind of evil, selfish trolls. Humans are quite capable of being noble without using religion as a motivator, as can be seen every day in the many charitable acts from the secular world. Look, I get that religion provides a framework for a lot of charitable works to be accomplished and billions of dollars have been spent doing many good things, but how many tens of millions of people have also suffered needlessly as a result of the policies that go hand in hand with that aid?

"Frankly, I find it morally offensive and insulting the way some religious people attach conditions to their offers of charity, with their Bible in one hand and hammer in the other attitude. Surely, if these good Christians were to follow a pure ideal of helping the less fortunate out of basic human kindness, they would simply offer their help. They're like the religious timeshare salesmen of the developing world. 'Come on in, everyone. Let me tell you what we are going to do for you today. We will build you a school, but first, you must attend one of our information sessions and read our literature to qualify for this one-time offer.' What kind of Christian attitude is that? To finish Sam Harris' point: 'We might also wonder, in passing, which is more moral: helping people purely out of concern for their suffering, or helping them because you think the creator of the universe will reward you for it?'

"Think of how much the Vatican could do if they sold off their massive holdings and used that money to eliminate poverty and illiteracy, with none of their spiritual strings attached. But, they don't do that, now do

they? As the comedienne, Sarah Silverman said, ‘[sell the Vatican, feed the world](#).’ Meanwhile, the world is still waiting for them to put their money where the hungry mouths are. Instead, the Vatican imposes their beliefs about procreation on those who rely on their charitable acts as a condition of receiving some cash. Superficially, the Vatican claims their policy is about the sanctity of life, but let’s be honest, it’s really all about money and power—as their history so clearly demonstrates.”

“Don’t you think that is a bit of an over-the-top generalization, Jeff?” Mr. Hobbes chastised.

“It’s not all about the money? Then why were the papal indulgences of Pope Leo X what moved Martin Luther to action, resulting in the Protestant Reformation? Let’s examine those two words: protest and reform. Why would there have been a protest or the need for reform in the first place if the Vatican was such a bastion of grace and nobility, as their own propaganda says they are? Surely, if the Vatican hierarchy throughout Church history were such angelic souls, everyone would have been happy and there would have been no schism with the Eastern Orthodox or the Protestant Churches.

“But no, they weren’t conducting themselves in a manner befitting God’s supposed representatives. Instead, Leo was selling indulgences to impressionable suckers eager to buy their loved ones out of purgatory—yet another bogus invention—and get them an express ticket to heaven. Though, perhaps extorting money is a better term for what Leo did in order to raise money for rebuilding St. Peter’s Basilica. In the end, the whole thing was nothing more than a sleazy fund-raising scheme masquerading as Vatican absolution. Forgiveness for cold, hard cash—and you say I’m wrong to categorize them as money-grubbing leeches on the faithful.

“The Vatican is not a religion unto itself, though they don’t seem to have gotten that memo judging by the way they strut around issuing decrees about their own infallibility. Besides, isn’t a truly religious experience between the person and their God of choice, without the middleman and all his doctrine? Though, I am sure the Vatican would disagree with that sentiment, seeing as they deliberately placed themselves in the way as unnecessary intermediaries on behalf of the masses. ‘Sorry, you can’t get to God directly, you have to go through us—and we’d like our cut first. Just drop it on the plate, thanks.’

“No, the Vatican is not a religion, but an institution that seems to go out of its way to inflict its archaic ideas on their followers. And, an institution that seems to care more about its own self-interest, protecting those pedophilic members within their ranks and covering its ass in general, rather than protecting the innocent souls they claim to care about. Let’s not forget their attempts at covering up these crimes by moving their offending brethren around to different parishes. Their behavior is nothing short of criminal obstruction of justice. The Vatican is a cancer that plagues the world, and it must be excised.”

“You do have many valid points about Vatican abuses throughout history, but the faults of organized religion are a separate issue to our faith,” Mr. Hobbes pointed out.

“Yes, organized religion sure does have a long history of screwing everything up.”

Linda, gearing up to launch a half-baked circular defense against Jeff’s tirade of insensitive characterizations, was sadly cut short by the ringing of the bell and the end of class.

Chapter 8:

I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else where I was capable of thinking for myself.

Thomas Jefferson

69th Fighter Wing Airborne And En Route . . .

The sixteen pilots of the 666th ‘Screamin’ Demons’ squadron were flying eastward over the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California, with the glare of the noonday sun reflecting off their canopies. The squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Major, came over the radio. “Good afternoon, Demons, this is Demon One. We hope you’ve enjoyed the flight so far, but I ask that you stow your trays and switch to our predetermined coded radio prefix and standby to receive final orders, Demon One, out.”

Major Dong, one of the four flight leaders, along with the rest of the squadron, each dialed in the assigned radio prefix given to them during their briefing and began to receive their individual targeting instructions over the CRM-114 radio discriminator in each jet. The Creationist Rebuttal Mechanism—or as it is playfully referred to by the pilots in the wing, the Bullshit Detector—is designed to block any transmission not prefixed with the proper code to prevent false orders from being issued to the pilots. Major Dong noted that the 666th squadron was tasked with bombing the four states on the northwestern edge of the Christian States of America: Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. The instructions assigned each of the four flights that made up the squadron, each flight consisting of four jets, to a single state and its major cities within the Christian theocracy.

After receiving his orders Major Dong verified his speed, altitude, and heading in relation to his assigned state and then requested confirmation from the other three pilots in his flight. When all the pilots had radioed their readiness, Major Dong pushed the throttles forward and turned his F-16C Fighting Falcon in the direction of their primary target. He was followed in beautifully choreographed sequence by his wingman, Captain Hu, and the other two planes in his flight. The other flights in the 666th squadron banked southeast towards their individual destinations and flew off to their assigned targets.

The remaining three squadrons of the 69th Fighter Wing, each flying in their own formations further south of the 666th, received instructions from their squadron leaders. The 42nd ‘Don’t Panic’ squadron, led by Colonel Manslake, was tasked with the biggest job of leading three out of his four flights to bomb the largest and most expansive state, Texas. The fourth flight, commanded by Major Felcher, was tasked with Louisiana. The third and fourth squadrons of the wing were assigned to the easternmost states; the third squadron to the northernmost states of Kentucky and Tennessee, the Virginias and Carolinas, leaving the fourth squadron to target the four southernmost states from Mississippi to Florida.

Chapter 9:

Any issue, including political, economic and religious activities human beings pursue in this world should be fully understood before we pass our judgment.

Dalai Lama, *A Biased Mind Cannot Grasp Reality* (2005)

Civics & Government Class . . .

Miss Trevalio, the young teacher of the civics class, entered the room and conversation stopped instantly as all the male eyes in the room turned toward her. Every schoolboy's fantasy teacher, Miss Trevalio was the epitome of the stereotypical sexy librarian, buried beneath a facade of respectability. She wore a prim and proper high-necked, old-fashioned cream blouse and a plain, brown skirt that modestly dropped below the knee. Her dark, red hair was swept back into a severe bun and she wore a pair of black 1950s-style cat eye glasses, making her look like she just stepped out of an old commercial for laundry soap. The glasses did nothing to diminish the elegant lines and the natural beauty of her Roman features, and one could see more than a passing resemblance to a young Sophia Loren. Nor did the attire mask the shapely body hidden underneath, over which the male students fantasized wickedly, longing to release her inner tigress. A recent graduate of the teaching academy, she was barely older than the students she was instructing, and her fresh-faced, youthful innocence drove the hormonal young boys wild with lust, which did not aid in the task of learning.

In the paradoxical world of the Christian States, the women in schools were allowed to attend the civics and government class after winning hard-fought battles in the school boards against the diehard traditionalists. These Christian hardliners had medieval opinions on the proper place for women, thinking that young ladies shouldn't trouble their minds with the worldly issues of men. It was thought female students would make better use of their time in a home economics class learning how to cook for their future families. So, in a world that doesn't make much sense most of the time anyway, one more inconsistency goes virtually unnoticed and the women join in our discussion.

"Good afternoon class," Miss Trevalio warmly greeted her students. "How is everyone this fine afternoon?"

A boisterous symphony of enthusiastic male voices responded all at once, drowning each other out in the race to figuratively polish her apple. A greater bunch of wannabe teacher's pets had never been assembled. Though, the girls remained strangely indifferent to this rival for the affections and attention of the boys, as they were dismissive of the drooling, young fools in the first place. Further, they were far too prudish to care.

"Today we are going to be discussing the outlawing of abortion in the Christian States, even though abortion is still legal beyond our borders. While the authorities do take steps to regulate and monitor the applications of women seeking travel visas to the United States, it is impossible to completely control the flow of people determined to seek prohibited goods and services outside the jurisdiction of the morality police."

"Thank God for small favors," Jeff muttered under his breath.

"What was that, Mr. Spicoli? Speak up, please."

"I said thank God for small favors," louder this time for everyone to hear easily.

"Would you care to explain that statement," Miss Trevalio demanded rather than asked.

"I think it's a wonderful thing that people can and do get out of the C.S.A. for small measures of personal freedom, particularly if it means pulling one over on the morality police and the immigration authorities seeking to prevent women from controlling their own bodies."

"Abortion is murder, Mr. Spicoli," Miss Trevalio said coldly, "we don't condone the taking of innocent life for the sake of convenience."

"Who said a newly fertilized embryo is a life?"

"The Constitution of the Christian States of America says so," Miss Trevalio stated adamantly, her temper rising.

"The framers of our Constitution were neither medical doctors, nor trained scientists. Our legislators—all of them theologically motivated and pushing a fundamentalist agenda—are drawn from traditional professions, like plumbers, dentists, a few actual lawyers, and teachers. All very noble occupations mind you, but hardly ones that are qualified to make informed judgments on the merits of science and medicine."

“They are guided by the hand of the Holy Spirit.”

“Well, that makes it all okay then, doesn’t it? They still don’t have a clue what they are talking about. We should leave the science to the experts, and maybe, then the Christian Right would be prevented from injecting their primitive thinking into the legislative process. Evangelicals—who have fully demonstrated that they are too ill-equipped to make informed decisions about science, and who take their cues from whatever skewed media outlet or church theology that best conforms to their own preconceived political and religious ideologies—have forced the men and women of Congress to pander to the biased wishes of this vocal minority of constituents. These politicians have allowed themselves to be held hostage in order to gain reelection, and routinely dumb themselves down, pretending they don’t believe in evolution to solicit votes from a populace too ignorant to know when they are being manipulated.

“We get the governments we deserve through our own indifference and apathy, and in doing so, cede the power of democracy by letting ignorant mobs make the rules. To paraphrase a famous proverb: beware the tyranny of an organized, ill-informed, self-righteous minority of unenlightened fools who form a powerful lobby for their own unique special interests. A marginally educated public, lacking the breadth and depth of knowledge required to counter the half-baked rhetoric of clueless politicians at the mercy of even dumber lobbying groups is a recipe for chaos, not for enlightened governance and legislation.”

“So, you think the general public is made up of ignorant fools who shouldn’t be allowed to vote? You think that we should have some form of elite meritocracy making decisions on our behalf?” Miss Trevalio questioned, oblivious to the irony of Christian fundamentalists deciding policies on behalf of everyone else.

“That is not what I said. I love how you try to put words in my mouth, take a statement out of context, twist it around, and try to use it to vilify me for your own propaganda. I said an *uninformed* populace should not be able to hold so much sway over the setting of policy by overriding the common sense of legislators who might be more inclined to vote based on facts. I never said we should be governed by a faction of elite power brokers, as any citizen has the right to run for office. However, if by meritocracy you imply that people should earn the right to vote by making an effort to be informed on the issues, then yes, I am all for that. Though, I freely admit, it would be impossible to implement practically. Democracy may have its flaws, but it is still the best option and it will have to do.”

“And, I suppose you think highly enough of yourself and your informed policies, that you understand the miracle of life, Mr. Spicoli?” Miss Trevalio asked dismissively, as if this impudent boy could possibly know more about a woman’s life-giving processes than she could.

“Well, for one thing, pregnancy is not a miracle. It’s just how nature works. And, given that I paid attention in health class and watched a documentary about pregnancy last night, yes, I would say I have a rough understanding. At least a better understanding than our legislators, it would seem, who think a fertilized embryo is a fully developed human fetus with a soul, a consciousness, a beating heart, and a brain; which, they believe because their pastor with a Bible college education told them so. Yeah, I’m confident that I know more than they do; but certainly not as much as a doctor or a scientist.”

“Well then, Doctor Spock, please enlighten us.”

“Okay. Despite the pro-life claims that life begins at the moment of fertilization, the common and modern medical definition is that pregnancy does not begin until the embryo has successfully implanted itself in the uterus. This implantation window does not even begin until about a week after conception, when the embryo migrates from the fallopian tube and attaches itself to the uterus. This implantation can only occur during a very specific time, or the *window* of opportunity. Beyond the implantation window, something is generally thought to be wrong with the embryo and the woman’s body will naturally expel it, often without the woman ever knowing she was even pregnant.

“In fact, though the frequency of occurrence is impossible to measure, estimates range that from ten- to sixty-two percent of all fertilized embryos will naturally miscarry, or clinically spontaneously abort, due to some genetic or chromosomal defect. However, twenty-five percent is probably a more realistic average for non-viable pregnancies, in which a malformed fetus would be rejected by a mother’s body. Astonishingly, these statistics reveal that anywhere from one-tenth to almost two-thirds of pregnancies end in a natural miscarriage within the first few days or weeks of fertilization. So, according to fundamentalists, all those miscarried embryos are to be considered a sacred life.

“The embryonic stage during the first trimester is when most abortions, whether a naturally occurring miscarriage or one that is medically induced, take place while the embryo is barely an inch long during the earliest weeks. It is not until ten weeks, or two and a half months of development, that the embryonic stage—as characterized by rapid cell division and the initial development of the head, arms, legs, brain,

heart, and other essential organs—ends and the fetal growth stage begins, accompanied by a substantial drop in the risk of miscarriage. Additionally, many doctors and scientists theorize, based on the lack of a developed nervous system, that a fetus can't feel pain until about twenty weeks or roughly halfway into the second trimester."

"While your description may be technically correct, we still maintain that every life, even an embryonic life, is precious," Miss Trevalio grudgingly conceded one point while standing her ground on the other.

"Well then, would you care to explain why your God is killing off roughly one-quarter of all these innocent lives—according to your definition? Surely, conceiving so many sacred lives only to wipe them out is extremely unnecessary."

"God has a plan for calling his children home to heaven to be with him," Miss Trevalio justified, unconvincingly, not sure she was even willing to buy that rationalization herself.

"Uh, right," Jeff stammered, stupefied at such a vacuous conclusion. "Well, if the embryo was going to be defective and God is supposedly all-knowing, why not just prevent its fertilization in the first place? Wouldn't that be a lot easier than calling little Bobby or Suzy back after manifesting their souls into a little bundle of cells? The whole process seems not only counterintuitive, but a complete waste of time and resources for an omnipotent deity with more important things to do—like smiting heathens with natural disasters. And, if your God created us, surely, he could have done a better job of designing and implementing the baby manufacturing procedures so that there isn't such an unacceptably high failure rate of embryos. That kind of shoddy track record and workmanship would be grounds for termination in any other profession. I guess your God must be protected by a union, the Inter-Stellar Makers Syndicate, or the Brotherhood of ISMS."

"God has a plan for everything, and I trust in his divine wisdom," professed Miss Trevalio, who refused to give an inch.

"I'm sure he does, but there certainly seems to be a lot of wasteful by-product in his production line. You pro-lifers believe every sperm and egg has the potential to create life, so shouldn't you consider masturbation and menstruation to be mass murder? Think of the billions of potential souls deprived of life every day, their brief existence extinguished in such an inglorious manner, wadded into a tissue and discarded without a second thought."

"I don't find you amusing, Mr. Spicoli. Your sense of humor is not appreciated in this classroom. Please leave your filth in the trash where it belongs and stick to the subject matter."

"Fine, I'm sorry, I admit that was over the line. To get back on topic, because I take the time and make the effort to educate myself on the issues so that I can understand the situation and have an informed opinion, I don't make knee-jerk objections to newly fertilized embryos being used in stem cell research, inhibiting the potential for fantastic new medical cures which could save lives or heal those with birth defects or injuries. Instead, we ban the research here, because it goes against what you think are God's plans for a tiny smear of matter. Maybe adult stem cells can prove to be just as effective as embryonic ones and we could avoid this sticky situation altogether, but only time and research will tell. In the meantime, we are falling further behind other secular countries with more open research policies. By voting to ban federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, our politicians, and the people who voted them in, demonstrate their complete ignorance of the science they are attempting to regulate. Embryonic stem cells are five-day-old blastocysts, a group of only about one hundred cells, but fundamentalist right-to-lifers protest because they think it is already a sanctified life.

"Further, what about the Christian Right pro-lifers who fight for the rights of the unborn, but then turn around and claim that government assistance to help raise all the little buggers after they're born is liberal, left-wing socialism? They're just like the Vatican, taking no financial responsibility for the care of the resulting child. Why do they fight for a child to be born, only to turn their backs and take away the means to help put food in the mouths of these kids, a roof over their heads, and clothes on their backs? Wouldn't the *truly* Christian thing be to provide for all the children the pro-lifers on the Christian Right insisted be born, and not moan about how evil welfare is? My God, the hypocrisy is overwhelming, and your Jesus would be ashamed of you!"

"I happen to agree with you on that point, Mr. Spicoli. I think we, as charitable Christians, should do more for the underprivileged and I disagree with the policies on welfare in this country. Jesus would want us to do all we can to help those in need, and I think we should."

"I must say that was unexpected, but I am impressed with your honesty and benevolent attitude. Perhaps you are familiar with the book *Freakonomics*, in which the author, an economist, proposed why the United

States experienced an unexpected drop in the crime rate in the 1990s. He theorized that in the generation coming of age after abortions were legalized, millions of unwanted babies were never born to mothers who didn't have the means to provide them with a stable upbringing. These children of mostly poor, single mothers didn't grow up without access to a decent education or good job opportunities, and therefore, they did not fall into a life of crime because they were never born in the first place."

"What a horrible assumption. You can't just assume these children would have automatically grown up to be criminals and use this as a convenient tool for society to justify the killing of the unborn. If there were proper social safety nets in place, those children would never have fallen through the cracks and they could have been brought into this world."

"I will grant you that, but this is an imperfect world and the social structure has never been there to fully support orphans or poor children in need. Many children in foster homes experience horrific abuse and neglect from their caregivers, so even if there was a better safety net that is no guarantee. The number of adoptive and foster parents would also have to multiply exponentially to absorb all the unwanted babies, with a great number still left behind to suffer in orphanages. Either way, we would still end up with a large number of disaffected young adults. That being the case, Miss Trevalio, may I ask you if there are ever any compassionate cases where abortion is justified in your opinion?"

"Never. A fetus should not be murdered for convenience, no matter the circumstances."

"Not even for minors who are victims of rape?"

"That must be God's plan for those poor girls."

"You have got to be kidding. That has to be the cruelest, most inhuman, idiotic, and unthinking rationalization I have ever heard. Egad, woman! Who is going to save the rest of us from the kind of closed-minded, medieval thinking that fundamentalists would so dearly love to impose upon the world?"

"Watch yourself, Mr. Spicoli. You are treading on dangerous ground."

"Okay, what if the mother's life is in danger from an ectopic pregnancy or any other life-threatening condition she may have? Shouldn't she, or her attending physician, have the independent choice to be able to decide what steps to take to save her life, rather than having that decision taken out of their hands by laws previously enacted for her by ignorant politicians? Surely, a fully grown human should have more rights than a developing embryo or fetus."

"Killing is never an acceptable solution."

"Really? The Christian Right doesn't seem to have any problem with executing criminals for capital offenses. What happened to the whole sanctity of life argument? Oh, I know, don't tell me, Old Testament justice of an eye for an eye. All very selective of you to claim, unscientifically, that life begins at conception and that a developing embryo has a constitutionally protected right to live. And yet, it is okay to kill a fully grown adult; and nowhere more so than in Texas, which executes more people than any other state. How do you justify that?"

"A fetus is innocent, and they have not broken any of God's laws. Whereas criminals who take another life violate the greatest commandment, thou shalt not kill, and in return, they forfeit their right to live."

"That's rather weak reasoning, given the unwavering argument that all life is sacred. Shall we conduct a thought experiment with a syllogism?"

"What's a syllogism?" a perplexed Linda inquired, joining the conversation after an unusually prolonged silence.

"A syllogism is a logical argument in deductive reasoning, where the conclusion is inferred from the relationship between statements. For example, Texas has executed more than five times the number of prisoners than the second-place state. Texas also has one of the highest per capita evangelical Christian populations. Therefore, I conclude, that Christians must be murdering, thieving criminals—but history has already abundantly demonstrated that bloodthirsty tendency. However, this example is more of a non sequitur rather than a syllogism."

"A non sequitur, you mean like the comic strip?" Linda asked.

Sometimes it was just not worth the time and effort to explain things, and so he took the path of least resistance. "Uh, sure," Jeff affirmed before continuing. "Anyway, this is an oversimplified argument, but it does illustrate the fallacy that living in a heavily Christian environment provides the framework for a moral society. People of faith are especially fond of claiming that without religion we would live in anarchy, but that argument is full of holes. Especially since having religion doesn't seem to make much of a difference, either; at least from the apparent number of criminals in Texas."

“How can you claim the argument is full of holes? Without religion, society would degenerate; just look at the U.S.” Linda protested.

“Because the argument is nothing more than what Christians want to believe, despite what the facts clearly dictate. As Professor Harari pointed out in *Homo Deus*, the exact opposite is true: ‘Not only do we possess far more power than ever before, but, against all expectations, God’s death did not lead to social collapse. Throughout history prophets and philosophers have argued that if humans stopped believing in a great cosmic plan, all law and order would vanish. Yet today, those who pose the greatest threat to global law and order are precisely those people who continue to believe in God and His all-encompassing plans.’

“Additionally, look at the liberal, secular democracies in Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand which are consistently ranked among the happiest, safest, and least religious societies in the world. Further, religion has absolutely nothing to do with moral values; again, despite what the religious claim. Evolutionary psychologists and philosophers agree that moral behavior sprang from an altruistic tendency, in that cooperation was good for social animals to lead safe and productive lives, and so it became ingrained in human collective psychologies as an adaptive benefit of evolution. In the video documentary of *The Bible Unearthed*, the presenters explained how the concept of individual rights and responsibilities came *before* the reformation in Deuteronomy, where these ideas became enshrined and transmitted through Judeo-Christian ethics; but, that ‘it’s here on this broken piece of pottery, as archaeological evidence from the time of Josiah, that what we now still believe as biblical tradition and biblical morality, was born among the people.’

“You have the privilege of turning your nose up at Christianity, because you grew up in a Western democratic society that instilled into you the Judeo-Christian values of freedom and human rights which you take for granted,” Miss Trevalio stated sanctimoniously.

“That is entirely incorrect. As I just pointed out, the ideas of humanism were not instilled by religion, but merely codified into religious texts *after* arising in the consciousness of the people. Harvard professor, Steven Pinker, also made this point in *Enlightenment Now*: ‘If the positive contributions of religious institutions come from their role as humanistic associations in civil society, then we would expect those benefits not to be tied to theistic belief, and that is indeed the case.’

“Further, this was not a Western phenomenon, as these humanist ideals flourished in several Eastern cultures, all around the time of the Deuteronomistic reforms, in what became known as the Axial Age. The German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, coined this term and he went on to point out how these ideals manifested in multiple cultures in his book, *Way To Wisdom*, where he wrote, ‘In the years centring around 500 B.C.—from 800 to 200—the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid, simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Palestine, and Greece. And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today.’ The Hindu Vedas, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, the writings of Confucius and his contemporaries, all contain examples of basic humanism concurrent with their emergence in the literature of Jewish and Greek societies.

“As to democracy, this was born centuries before Jesus came along, as first developed by the ancient Greeks—who, by the way, were boy-loving pagans. The Greeks then served as an inspiration for the founders of the Roman Republic, again also pagan, which later inspired the likes of George Washington and his buddies for their vision of the Republic of the United States. Greek and Roman societies still had their problems to be sure, as no system is ever perfect, but it was a start. So, I’m sorry, but you can’t claim Christian values spurred the creation of democracy when these ideas were thought up long before anyone had ever heard of Jesus.

“Judeo-Christian ethics played a later role in the fight to extend democratic concepts and civil rights, which—you are correct—we take for granted today. But, you can’t claim that the awareness of basic human rights and common decency only derive from religious values. As pre-Christian history demonstrates, people know the difference between right or wrong and, for the most part, want to fight against injustice when they see it. To think Christianity is a model of noble and virtuous ideology, is also to not be paying attention, as pointed out in *Can Religion Cure Our Troubles?* by Bertrand Russell: ‘But has Christianity, in fact, stood for a better morality than that of its rivals and opponents? I do not see how any honest student of history can maintain that this is the case. Christianity has been distinguished from other religions by its greater readiness for persecution. . . . The whole contention that Christianity has had an elevating moral influence can only be maintained by wholesale ignoring or falsification of the historical evidence.’”

“Society is not perfect, but we, as good Christians, try to live a righteous life even though there are a multitude of sinners in the world,” Linda defended.

“No, society is not perfect; least of all our puritanical nation of repressed and uptight citizens.”

“We are *not* an uptight, puritanical nation,” Linda declared.

“Oh no, our society doesn’t descend from the *Mayflower* Pilgrims who landed on Plymouth Rock?”

“Well, yes, but what does that have to do with us being a nation of Puritans?”

“Dear Lord, your historical knowledge is appalling. The Puritans were a group of hyper-repressed Christians fleeing the Church of England—an institution, which, ironically, was trying to repress them and their overzealous ways. So, they left England to seek the religious freedom of the New World, where they could freely practice religious intolerance. These separatists—who thought stern John Calvin was too misguided and liberal—were the ultra-uptight British Protestants who laid the foundations of the New England colonies. Like their counterparts in ultra-Orthodox Judaism, these devoted Christians sought to live as pure a life as they possibly could. Their repressive legacy has been handed down to us in the modern age where America is still overly uptight, especially in comparison to modern, secular European societies.”

“How are we still, to use your word, as uptight as our Puritan ancestors?” Linda demanded to know.

“You can’t see the puritanical streak still evident today in North America? Oh come on, the Christian States were founded on the rejection of a liberal, secular society in place of a Christian theocracy. Even before we split off, the Bible Belt states had a long and wacky history of repressed thinking, from the Scopes trial to the school board fights over creationism and textbook references. The best example has got to be Janet Jackson’s boob popping out on television for a split second when a segment of the American population lost their collective, prudish minds and furiously wrote letters to the network and the F.C.C. over the scandalous broadcast of an entirely natural human breast. ‘My goodness gracious, little Timmy has been scarred for life. We better enroll him in extra Bible classes, lest he be tempted by lust and descend into wicked ways.’ Seriously, get a grip on reality would ya,” Jeff added sarcastically.

“Of course, the fun didn’t stop with the Puritans, oh no, not by a long shot. No, we had to have our own homegrown fundamentalists who would take things even further. Our puritanical origins ended up spawning the Adventist, Mormon, Pentecostal, and evangelical Christian movements. The nagging question is: where did all these fundamentalists and their ridiculous ideologies come from in the first place?”

“I’m sure you are going to tell us whether we want you to or not,” Linda stated.

“Come on now, you’ve played along this far, I don’t think you want to go home with only half the story. We’ve examined the biblical history and textual scholarship that led us to modern Christianity, but along the way, some American Protestants decided to go off in a unique direction all by themselves. It might help your understanding if you knew where, when, and why. Let me use a tree analogy to illustrate how American fundamentalist Christianity grew. If the Puritans were the seeds, then the roots were in the dispensationalism of John Nelson Darby in the 1830s, and the trunk grew out of the divinity school of the Presbyterian Church, the Princeton Theological Seminary, during the last half of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth.”

“What is dispensationalism?” Miss Trevalio asked.

“That is a very good question and since dispensationalist doctrine is the direct ancestor of your fundamentalist beliefs, you should—as good, God-fearing evangelicals who parrot his ideology—all know who John Nelson Darby was and what his beliefs were. Darby was a former Anglican priest in the Church of Ireland who is considered the founder of the movement which believes that God relates to humankind, or dispenses his will, in different ways over time. Examples of these varying dispensations would be the covenants with Abraham and Moses; or to Christians with the new order as proclaimed by Jesus and the Kingdom. The core of Darby’s doctrine, as with the original message of Jesus and preached by Paul, was apocalyptic and preoccupied with the coming end-times. I suppose in this way, fundamentalists really are going back to the original fundamentals of the ministry of Jesus.

“Darby was obsessed with his ideas on the rapture, when Christians will rise into the sky to meet the returning Christ, and he made it a central tenet of his theology based on Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians—as his doctrinal descendants Lindsey and LaHaye do in their books. Yet, *no* Christian sect in the previous eighteen hundred years had *ever* preached a rapture doctrine. Darby’s premillennial beliefs—as in before the one-thousand-year reign of Jesus described in Revelation 20—were wholly and *entirely new* in Christian thinking. Now, hands up, who in the class just assumed rapture ideology has always been a part of Christianity and not a radically new tangent invented only within the last two hundred years? Come on, be honest,” Jeff beseeched them when the class hesitated, then slowly hands went up around the room.

“As I thought, you preach the words, but you have no idea where they came from. Although, one of the three Cappadocian Fathers and a Doctor of the Church, Saint Basil the Bishop of Caesarea, would be so

proud of you. He said, ‘Let us Christians prefer the simplicity of our faith to the demonstrations of human reason . . . For to spend much time on research about the essence of things would not serve the edification of the Church.’ That’s a nice way of saying if you, the faithful, know too much, then you might start to question the divinely ordained authority of your church leaders and the pungent doctrines they impose upon you. Then they might have to do something drastic, like excommunicate you, or strap you to a rack and force you to rethink the error of your ways,” Jeff concluded irreverently.

“Getting back to Darby’s obsession with the rapture, in Karen Armstrong’s book *The Battle for God*, which documents the rise of fundamentalism in all three monotheistic faiths, she described Darby and his sadistic doctrine of premillennialism as ‘a fantasy of revenge: the elect imagined themselves gazing down upon the sufferings of those who had jeered at their beliefs, ignored, ridiculed, and marginalized their faith, and now, too late, realized their error. . . . Like many concrete depictions of mythical events, the scene looks a little absurd, but the reality it purports to present is cruel, divisive and tragic.’ What a darling bunch of loving people, these devotees of Darby’s divine drivel. These zealots like to ignore the Christian teachings of your loving Jesus to turn the other cheek. I guess it is so much more rewarding to adopt superior attitudes and envision fiery tales of retribution directed at the unbelievers—just like Luke and Tommy’s petty visions.

“Moving on from the dispensationalists to the Presbyterian stronghold of the Princeton Theological Seminary, it is here where we discover the origins of the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy in the mid-1800s. It was at this bastion of Calvinist intensity that the faculty theologians dreamt up the concepts of literal and inerrant interpretations. They then taught it to thousands of student ministers who, unfortunately, went out among the flock and spread this particular brand of fertilizer into the minds of millions of Americans over the last one hundred plus years.

“Thanks to leaders of the seminary, like Charles Hodge and his son Archibald Alexander Hodge—both of whom published definitive papers on scriptural inerrancy and the literal truth of the Bible—these rigid new ideas began to insidiously pervade the American landscape. Charlie’s book, *Systematic Theology*, uses a scientific basis—really, I’m serious—to defend his belief in the inerrant and literal truths of the Bible. His son, Archie, also defended this newly thought up literal stance in the *Princeton Review* by stating categorically that the Bible was ‘absolutely errorless and binding for faith and obedience.’ The Bible says so, therefore, it must be true, and you better obey it.

“It is ludicrously ironic that the Hodges attempted to use science to rationalize a wholly unscientific and circular argument. What is even scarier is that millions of people now subscribe to this exact doctrine, thanks directly to their influence over the generations of ministers coming out of their fundamentalist seminary. Or, as Karen Armstrong described it: ‘There was desperation in Princeton theology. “Religion has to fight for its life against a large class of scientific men,” Charles Hodge declared in 1874.’ This desperation was fueled by fears of an uncertain future in a rapidly changing modern world, a world in which religion was losing its place. It was this desperation and a need for reassurance that drove the quest for absolute certainty, an imagined guarantee which formed the inflexible core of the literal and inerrant interpretations of fundamentalist doctrine.

“These doctrines of literalism and inerrancy were codified into evangelical beliefs when the American incarnation of the Presbyterian Church [issued](#) the *Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910*, establishing five key fundamentals as essential to their Christian beliefs. It is from these five core beliefs that fundamentalists derive their name. Those five beliefs being: the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore scripture is inerrant, the virgin birth of Jesus, his death as an atonement for human sin, his bodily resurrection, and the historical reality of his miracles. ‘If you choose not to believe these five fundamentals, then we have some lovely parting gifts for you. So long, don’t let the door hit you in the butt on your way out of the church. You obviously don’t play well with others and we don’t want your kind around here infecting the minds of decent conservative Christians with your liberal reasoning, so be off with you.’

“So, my fellow evangelical classmates, these are where your fundamentalist beliefs came from and *very* recently, mind you. Though to be fair, today there is nominally a difference between a fundamentalist and an evangelical, but originally the two terms were synonymous as both maintain a fundamental belief in the inerrant, literal truth of the Bible. However, by the 1950s the two camps had started to diverge. A more restrained attitude of spiritual outreach was prevalent in the evangelical community, but fundamentalists maintained an attack mentality against liberal society. The fundamentalists were also hard-core dispensationalists who raised their obsession with the imminent premillennial rapture to the status of a core belief. However, I prefer the terms ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘exaspergelicals.’ I think this more accurately describes the closed minds of a group of people so categorically, undeniably, exasperatingly, and

fundamentally wrong in their interpretations and beliefs, that it has left them wandering around in a state of dazed confusion. Though, I am sure they refer to that feeling as being touched by the Holy Spirit.

“Now, given that the rise of evangelical beliefs is so relevant to modern American society, and because they have had such an influence on so many issues, I think it is important to sum this up concisely. Therefore, I would like to quote directly from *The Battle for God* to clearly highlight the points. Please bear with me, as these points are scattered over several pages.

It is important that we understand the dread and anxiety that lie at the heart of the fundamentalist vision, because only then will we begin to comprehend its passionate rage, its frantic desire to fill the void with certainty, and its conviction of ever-encroaching evil. . . .

. . . Since the late nineteenth century, American fundamentalists had responded to the challenge of modernity by trying to make their faith wholly rational. They had emphasized the virtues of reason and plain sense; they had embraced a sober literalism that eschewed imagination and fantasy. . . . Theirs had been an ethic of separation; fundamentalists had created a counterculture that was supposed to be everything that the Godless mainstream was not: it was a faith that offered cast-iron certainty and hierarchy to challenge the doubts, open questions, and shifting roles of the modern world. . . .

. . . By trying to make their faith scientific and rational, the fundamentalists had pushed religion into an unnatural mode. . . .

. . . By insisting that the truths of Christianity are factual and scientifically demonstrable, American Protestant fundamentalists have created a caricature of both religion and science. . . .

. . . What seems sacred and positive in one camp appears demonic and deranged in the other. Secularists and religious both feel profoundly threatened by one another, and when there is a clash of two wholly irreconcilable worldviews . . . the sense of estrangement and alienation is only exacerbated.

“That pretty much hit the nail on the head,” Jeff concluded.

“Whatever. That whole explanation is garbage. I’m not filled with dread and anxiety,” Linda insisted.

“Maybe you aren’t, but there is still a very prevalent fear of creeping secularism, not only within evangelical spheres, but within the Catholic and Orthodox communities, as well.”

“You’re talking nonsense again,” said Linda defensively. “I don’t fear secular society; I just wish you’d all go away and leave us in peace.”

“Trust me, non-believers feel the exact same way towards you. However, if you and the faithful from other religions are not afraid that secular humanism will cast you all aside, then what’s with all the evidence to the contrary?”

“Like what?”

“Like Pope Benedict XVI speaking in 2007 about the historically devout Irish and their retreat from their absolute obedience to the Catholic Church, when he [warned](#) that ‘secularism has also begun to encroach and leave its mark.’ He also [criticized](#) ‘aggressive secularism’ in both the United Kingdom and Spain in 2010. Benedict’s comments underscore and illustrate the pressure religious authorities from all faiths are feeling from the increasing secularization of society. These religious leaders feel surrounded on all sides and they are desperate to remain relevant in the worldwide fight against their marginalization and ultimate obsolescence.”

“All faiths?” Linda contested.

“At least the Christian faiths, judging by the *Manhattan Declaration*, which was released in November 2009 and signed by the leading figures from numerous Christian denominations. This [declaration](#) stated in part: ‘We, as Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Christians . . . make the following declaration. . . . We act together in obedience to the one true God, the triune God of holiness and love, who has laid total claim on our lives and by that claim calls us with believers in all ages and nations to seek and defend the good of all who bear his image.’ It goes on to say, ‘we are especially troubled that in our nation today . . . that freedom of religion and the rights of conscience are gravely jeopardized by those who would use the instruments of coercion to compel persons of faith to compromise their deepest convictions.’ That sounds suspiciously like a reactionary statement to their deep dread of Christianity being side-lined by secularism and forced to conform to the modern world.

“However, when they stated that ‘while fully acknowledging the imperfections and shortcomings of Christian institutions and communities in all ages,’ at least they were being honest about the tarnished history religion has had on society. They also try to make the point about the benefits Christian values have brought to society, like caring for orphans, fighting for democracy, and human rights, which, as we know from previous points, these humanist values predate Christianity. There are tens of millions of non-believers who don’t need a book or a religion to tell us what is right, we just know and do it anyway.

“Speaking of rights, the *Manhattan Declaration* goes on to whine about:

Those who would trample upon the freedom of others to express their religious and moral commitments . . .

[and]

. . . the decline in respect for religious values in the media, the academy and political leadership, resulting in restrictions on the free exercise of religion. We view this as an ominous development . . . because the trend also threatens the common welfare and the culture of freedom on which our system of republican government is founded.

“Fighting back with petulant declarations like this only make these conservative traditionalists look sulky and desperate in their increasingly obvious irrelevance. However, there is no threat to the culture of freedom, as they claim. Freedoms for *all* religions are still protected, but these whiners are just irritated that they don’t have the freedom to impose *their* Christian religion on society in general. Christians are perfectly free to think whatever they want; the rest of us merely ask that they do it in private and not make everybody else conform to their religious views. If believers want God in schools, then they can go to private religious institutions, or be home-schooled by their own indoctrinated parents, but leave it out of the public domain.

“But secularists *are* forcing their repellent ideologies upon Christians—and violating God’s laws,” Miss Trevalio fought back.

“No, we aren’t. That is pure exaggeration and a completely unfounded accusation. Secularists don’t say that the faithful can’t believe in God, or that they can’t go to church, or which church to attend. Those choices are your own private concern and they are yours to decide freely, but you don’t give the rest of us the same respect in return. The non-faithful merely ask that you allow others with different ideologies to do as they please, whether that conflicts with your concepts of morality or not. The difference between secular and religious proponents is that the latter try to force their beliefs on everyone else, and the former allow people the freedom to think for themselves and make their own decisions.

“It is the faithful who try to dictate to others what they can or cannot do. And, imposing religious values on others is neither fair, nor rational, nor is it their right to determine how the rest of society should be permitted to live. That goes completely against every principle of freedom that America was founded upon. Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians think that *their* religion should be integrated into the state and disseminated throughout society, against the will of the rest of the populace. No other group, religious or secular, is forcing their beliefs upon Christians in the same way that fundamentalists and evangelicals try to do to everyone else. Live and let live, baby. If you want to do *your* thing in *your* church, in *private*, then go for it. No secular humanist is stopping you, or even suggesting that believers should be prevented from the private worship of their individual faiths.”

Linda spouted petulantly, “But, that’s not true. Secular humanists try to tell us what to think all the time; they say our beliefs are wrong and that we can’t have prayer or religion in schools. You have been telling us all day what we shouldn’t believe in, like you are some sort of atheist apostle on a mission to the faithful, preaching your message of salvation from salvation.”

“Ha! I like that, an atheist apostle. That’s a good one. Have you heard the good news? Your minds are free, now go and live your lives. But seriously, you completely missed the point, again. I never said you can’t believe, just that the beliefs themselves have questionable historical origins. Allow others the freedom to make their own choices, such as if they want to have an abortion or if same-sex partners wish to get married.”

“We will *never* accept any principles which violate God’s law,” Miss Trevalio stated, matter-of-factly.

“In your mind,” Jeff countered quickly.

“In God’s mind!” Miss Trevalio thundered.

“How about we all agree that the faithful can choose to avoid the things they find distasteful, but you let everyone else have the freedom to do their own things. It is *not* for Christians to decide how others should live their lives, no matter how badly you think it is your God-given right to do so.

“Though, Archbishop Hilarion of the Russian Orthodox Church would strenuously disagree with that ideal of free thought. The Russian Orthodox Church proposed a united front with their Vatican counterparts in their common fight against the secular threat that challenges their authority for the minds of their flocks. Hilarion believes that with the combined strength of both Churches poking their fingers in the holes that are springing up everywhere, they can prevent a catastrophic breach in the dam holding back the great, secular sea that threatens to swamp them. In the introduction to a book he gave to Pope Benedict XVI, Hilarion [wrote](#), ‘For religion, militant secularism is just as dangerous as militant atheism was. Both tend to exclude religion from the public and political sphere, relegating it to a ghetto, confining it to the area of private devotion.’ And what, exactly, is the problem with confining religion to private devotion? I fail to see his logic here. Though, this concern obviously fuels his frantic desire to save the soul of Europe from—what he imagines—is a dastardly ‘Western post-Christian humanism.’

“Also, just like the *Manhattan Declaration* which justifies the use of civil disobedience when Christian zealots feel they need to defend their religious liberties from infringements by evil secularists, Hilarion’s paranoid rant goes on to state, ‘When a civil law contradicts divine law on an essential matter, it ceases to be law and becomes illegal. When respecting such a law would force the Christian to commit a grave sin, the Christian is held to denounce it through legal means and, if necessary, resort to civil disobedience. Obviously, disobeying a civil law is an extreme measure that a particular church can adopt in exceptional circumstances. But it is a possibility that cannot be excluded in advance, if a system of secularized values becomes the only operating one in Europe.’

“Yes, please save us from ourselves and a secular humanist ideology of reason, free from Christian repression. Ah, one question Archbishop Hilarious: who is going to save us from the likes of you and others who share your fanatically intolerant and dogmatic visions?”

“Maybe society should be wary of secularism. Look at Hitler and Stalin,” Linda stated with an air of superiority, as if she had just played the ace up her sleeve to win the game.

“What about them?”

“They were atheists and look at what happened to the tens of millions they killed when they tried to take religion out of society.”

“And there it is. At long last, the old standby, that tired and clichéd ploy of the truly small-minded whose weak argument has finally run out of steam. Stalin had been a student at an Orthodox seminary, and Hitler was a Catholic whose anti-Semitism was fueled by centuries of Christian doctrine. It wasn’t atheism that made them psychotic, so the basic premise of your argument and the reasoning behind it is completely flawed. Communism and Nazism merely replaced religious ideologies with political ones, especially as totalitarian regimes don’t like competing systems of thought; and most definitely not from religious ones. Not that the Catholic Church spoke out against fascism in Italy, where the Church eagerly signed the Lateran Treaty which granted the Vatican autonomous statehood in return for not openly opposing the jack-booted thugs of Mussolini.

“Although, it is rather amusing how religious leaders, like Hilarion, get irritated by challenges to their declining influence, as directly demonstrated by the *Manhattan Declaration*. The days of organized religion as a powerful force in the everyday lives of civilian society are numbered, and religious leaders know it despite their pathetic attempts to claim they are the only beacons of morality in the world. Their only hope of clinging to power is to be reactionary and tighten their grip over the thoughts and actions of their dwindling followers. Sadly, as the powers that be desperately strive to hold onto their past glory, the more reactionary and irrelevant they appear to modern society—like a petulant toddler throwing a temper tantrum for not being allowed to have things their way.

“And they better get used to the new situation, because society in general has put religious leaders on notice. We, the people, have said enough is enough of their medieval repression and we reject their notions of self-appointed authority. In this age of growing secularism, the gloves have come off and many are now starting to speak up after centuries of domination and repression at the hands of unrestrained religious control. And, due to the availability of all the new scholarly research, secular humanists have now been forewarned with an arsenal of truth about religious fictions and are forearmed to fight back against the agents of ignorance who seek to repress freedom.”

“Why do you even care what religious people think? Why do you have this obsessive need to tell us we are all wrong?” Linda challenged.

“You mean other than fighting back against the attempts of religious people to dictate the social lives of millions of other non-believers? Do you think society should just remain silent and tolerate the systematic brainwashing of *billions* of people with demonstrably false ideologies, as one generation after another continues to indoctrinate the children of the next? How else can society fight the disease of religion and stop it from atrophying the brains of people, unless there can be blunt and open discussions about this close-minded, faith-based mentality? Society will just get four thousand more years of the same problems that have plagued humankind since the dawn of recorded history—unless we take active measures to challenge this kind of thinking.

“I realize the devoutly faithful will never change, but maybe the more open-minded and casual believers might just have a spark of reasoning and independent thought. The princes of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are right to fear secularism, but not for the reasons they publicly proclaim to instill fear into the hearts of the mindless. Counter to the hysterical hand-wringing of the vested interests, secularism will not destroy the moral fabric of society, but it will rob religious authorities of the control they have exploited for centuries. It is losing their traditional power base and pending irrelevance that they really fear, while they rage impotently against secularism and the dying of the light.

“The fear theists have of being relegated to obscurity in a liberal society, is equally felt by secular humanists in the face of a theist onslaught. Given the threat of being overwhelmed by fundamentalist oppression, secular freethinkers are no different with our concerns of mutually assured destruction. I worry that my right to think for myself could be usurped and steadily eroded in the face of the religious retaliation against secularism. Naturally, I will rebel just as staunchly and passionately as the religious do against the perceived evil, oozing specter of creeping liberalism that scared the living daylights out of your ancestors.

“Though organized religion is fearful of losing control to secularism, frankly, it is the rest of us that should be scared silly by the lot of you and your dark visions for repressing freedom of thought, expression, and life in general. You fear annihilation, but I say good riddance, and may God speed you on your journey to obsolescence. Maybe that technology that scares so many fundamentalists will help hurry the process. Can I get an amen?”

“What the heck are you talking about? I’m not afraid of technology or annihilation,” Linda sputtered dismissively.

“Yeah, you aren’t afraid because you grew up with technology and are totally familiar with it. The most technologically terrifying experience you’ve ever had is deciding what phone to buy and which color will best match your shoes. I am not talking about you in particular, but about the people that formulated the ideologies you believe in devoutly, and the uncertainties and fear they went through during the industrial revolution and World War One,” Jeff countered forcefully.

“Your kindred spirit buddies are still scared of secularism and all it foreshadows, whether you admit it or not, as pointed out by former fundamentalists who freed their minds and escaped from the insidious grasp of religious intolerance. People like Dan Barker, a former Pentecostal Assembly of God preacher and now co-founder of the *Freedom from Religion Foundation*. Or Frank Schaeffer, author of *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*.”

“As Frank [wrote](#) candidly in a blog in January 2010:

The key to understanding the popularity of this [Left Behind] series . . . isn’t some new or sudden interest in prophecy, but the deepening inferiority complex suffered by the evangelical/fundamentalist community.

The words “left behind” are ironically what the books are about, but not in the way their authors intended. The evangelical/fundamentalists . . . have been *left behind* by modernity. They won’t change their literalistic anti-science, anti-education, anti-everything superstitions, so now they nurse a deep grievance against “the world. . . .”

. . . Most of that sense of lost battles is related to the so-called “Culture Wars” issues in which evangelical/fundamentalists did not fare so well, from the legalization of abortion to gay rights. But rather than admitting that they were often losing the arguments . . . they blamed everyone else, from the courts to organizations such as Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, the *New York Times*, and the “left-wing media.” . . .

. . . Others like Fox and Palin carried on where I and many others in the first wave of the anti-abortion/religious Right wave left off, pushing the victimhood mythology to the next generation of evangelical/fundamentalists, and they have cultivated a following based on ceaselessly warning them about “the world.”

A host of evangelical/fundamentalist Cassandras tour college campuses reinforcing their followers’ perennial chip-on-the-shoulder attitude by telling fearful evangelical/fundamentalist students to hold fast against the secular onslaught.

“There you have it, straight from the mouth of one of your previously admired leaders,” Jeff concluded.

“Yes, *previously* is the key word,” Linda taunted. “His views are no longer considered authoritative within the rank and file of the evangelical community.”

“Why? Just because he now condemns the movement he helped to build and the literalist mindset that keeps you all locked in mental prisons of your own design, suddenly his point of view no longer counts? Don’t bother answering, as your excuses and justifications will be too transparent and sycophantic to be taken seriously.

“However, before we went off on that tangent due to your denial that the faithful fear secular society, I was about to explain where this fear came from and how it became such an influential feature of evangelical beliefs. So, may I continue?” Jeff inquired.

“Be my guest,” Linda replied.

“Shortly after the *Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910*, Europe became embroiled in World War One from 1914 to 1918, bringing misery to millions of people on a scale never before seen. A conflict so horrific and using an entirely new breed of modern weaponry to inflict a huge number of casualties, that it became known as the war to end all wars. Millennial Christian believers on the margins of society, already frightened by the uncertainty of the shifting tides of industrialization, were absolutely terrified by this dreadful war and the senseless slaughter being driven by the same industrial processes. They took it as a sign confirming their deepest beliefs that the world was surely about to end. As fundamentalism tightened its grip a little more around the neck of conservative Christians, the door to their minds drew nearer to closing.

“However, there was a light at the end of the tunnel for these terrified fundamentalists. After the Ottoman Turkish forces were defeated in 1917 and they lost control over Palestine, the British Foreign Secretary wrote a letter to a leader of the Jewish community in England. This letter became known as the Balfour Declaration which [stated](#) that in ‘sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations . . . His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.’ I should stress in light of the current tensions between the Israelis and Palestinians that Balfour went on to explicitly say, ‘it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.’ Not that this latter good intention had the desired outcome, as we all know from watching the evening news for the past several generations.

“After World War One and the Balfour Declaration failed to kick off the end-times, fundamentalism eventually began to clash with science as the Scopes trial got underway in 1925. Before the trial, evolution had not been a hot-button issue for fundamentalists and few, if any, argued that the Genesis account of creation was an inerrant and scientific certainty. Afterward, though, the door to the fundamentalist mind slammed shut, got stuck in the frame, and their absolute, unwavering dedication to a literal interpretation of creationism had now been cast in stone.

“In the aftermath of the Scopes trial, the whole fundamentalist movement had been ridiculed as a national disgrace by the mentally stable majority of Americans who had concluded that fundamentalists could not, and should not, be taken seriously. And so, fundamentalists skulked off into a dark corner to bide their time. During this self-imposed isolation, their latent hostility grew by leaps and bounds towards an increasingly secular society that sought to repress their way of life. However, evangelical Christians had not been idle during this time of public dormancy, as they were busy building a strong base to anchor their growing numbers at the grassroots level in their local churches and communities.

“The numbers of fundamentalist believers began to swell during the 1960s and ’70s as more traditional, mainstream Protestants began to join their ranks, driven by the modernization of the Southern states. The South was experiencing a rapid industrialization a century after the North, and Christians here suddenly had to confront the same existential uncertainties their Yankee fundamentalist brethren had previously experienced. A second factor driving mainstream Christians into their fold was a series of Supreme Court decisions that banished religion from schools. Reciting the Lord’s Prayer and teaching creationism in public

schools violated the First Amendment principle of religious freedom, and by 1968 the courts had finally declared, once and for all in the *Epperson versus Arkansas* case, that it was unconstitutional to base teachings around any religion or its tenets.

“So, it was this removal of God from public schools and the forced containment of religion that upset a lot of moderate Christians. As these government rulings pushed moderates into a more evangelical mindset, they began pulling their kids out of public schools and enrolling them in private Christian academies. Christian schools and Bible colleges sprang up to indoctrinate children in the proper way of thinking, setting the stage for generations of children who had their intellects neatly contained by fundamentalist dogma.

“By the 1980s, Jerry Falwell’s new political lobbyist group, the Moral Majority, burst onto the scene to challenge this side-lining of religion by secular forces. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians finally felt strong enough to come out of their self-imposed exile, where they had started swinging to the political right, to challenge the liberal mainstream. This new politically motivated bloc of voters added their momentum to the Moral Majority to form the base of the New Christian Right. Conservative Christians had become an organized coalition, a force to be reckoned with on a number of socio-political issues, and a thorn in the side of biology teachers over evolution. Essentially, the Moral Majority hijacked the Republican Party and shunted the moderate, rational conservatives aside.

“When you think about it, it’s a shame that conservative—which used to be synonymous with responsibility—is now associated with narrow-minded, uptight zealotry, and a stubborn rejection of logic and facts. Even though I tend to be fiscally conservative, though socially liberal, I could not in good conscience support the Republicans after the way they have so shamefully gotten into bed with the Christian Right, blatantly sucking up to them for votes. The Republicans are like the whores of Babylon, spreading their legs to allow the Christians to have their missionary way with them—and without even making them buy dinner first.”

“Enough with the rhetoric and political commentary; just stick to the facts,” Miss Trevalio chastised.

“Noted, moving on. Conservative Christians feared that a liberal, secular humanist agenda was beginning to pervade all aspects of American society. They felt that if they didn’t start to fight back there wouldn’t be any Christian-educated children left—God forbid—to grow up to be decent, God-fearing adults. Once again, the fundamentalist fear of annihilation was manifesting itself. As irrational and paranoid as these concerns may have been, it was no use trying to convince them there was no demonic, secular conspiracy to destroy them or American family values.

“Christians started kicking in doors and taking no prisoners, as there was a new sheriff in town and the New Christian Right was going to take on creeping liberalism and the evils of tolerance. Abortion needed to be outlawed. Immoral sexual promiscuity needed to be reined in and restricted to the sanctity of marriage. Homosexuality was to be categorized as aberrant and unnatural, with the participants of such lifestyles to receive the Christian counseling and sexual reeducation they so obviously needed in order to set them on the proper path to God. Basically, the New Christian Right wanted a police state regulated by uptight morality cops as bad as any hardline Islamic regime. Their stance is ironic given the New Christian Right’s visceral hatred of Islam, especially since they’re different sides of the same coin.

“The Moral Majority believed that with the combined strength of the conservative faithful from all religions they had enough votes to win political office and begin to set policy in their favor—policies to drag an unwilling population kicking and screaming back into the Dark Ages. However, the Moral Majority failed to account for their traditional antagonism and alienation of every other faith, denomination, creed, color, or sexual orientation, and consequently their voter base never really extended much beyond white, Southern Protestants.

“But, early in the twenty-first century, the Southern Bible Belt states succeeded where their forefathers had failed. These latter-day Christian zealots had managed to secede peacefully to found the Christian States we now live in, but not before they wreaked havoc on American society for thirty years. Though, I suppose it was only a peaceful secession because those dastardly Northern liberals were probably more than happy to see us go and didn’t make any fuss as we saw ourselves out, leaving them to their own moral destruction.”

“What makes you think conservative Christians wreaked havoc on American society?” Miss Trevalio asked.

“You mean besides the millions of dollars that went to waste on numerous trials to fight creationism in the classroom? Money that would have been better spent upgrading aging schools, funding arts programs, giving teachers the raises they deserve. Anything would have been better than flushing it down the toilet with futile attempts to challenge the First Amendment, cases the antagonists were destined to lose each time.

“When attempting to challenge these court decisions prohibiting religion in the public sphere, Christians like to cite Thomas Jefferson’s 1802 [letter](#) to the Danbury Baptist Association. In this famous and often quoted passage, Jefferson stated, ‘I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.’ Evangelical Christians like to claim that Jefferson’s *intention* was to protect religion from interference by the state and not to protect society from religion. Ironically, Christians are fond of referring to Jefferson, but only when it is convenient for them to do so. At other times, they demonize him for being too liberal and accuse him of trying to keep religion out of government.

“Those with this revisionist perspective argue that the Puritans did not come to the New World for religious freedom, but to found Christian colonies that were to be administered according to biblical law. Evangelicals believe that this set a historical precedent for them to run the country along strict Christian ideals. And even if the United States—as opposed to the original colonies—was not explicitly founded as a Christian country, the Christian Right continues to argue that the country was established with Judeo-Christian values. Therefore, they claim it is their right to project Christianity into the public realm.

“These Christians get particularly upset at perceived restraints on the free exercise of their faith. They feel that Christianity is being pushed into a corner, especially given that these court cases seem to restrict religion in order to guarantee freedom of religion for all faiths—or none at all. Basically, Christian evangelicals resent the government’s constant meddling in their attempts to brainwash the masses on the public dime. Their reaction to this situation is to have screaming fits at not being allowed free rein to do things their way, like in the old days. The funniest part about the right to freedom of religion is that some Christians were really annoyed that the Supreme Court would grant the same rights and privileges to non-Christian faiths. They, naturally, assumed the protections granted under this policy only applied to the practice of Christianity. Someone really needs to give you fundamentalists a crash course in semantics.”

“What is semantics?” a befuddled Linda asked.

“Linda, I am going to buy you a pocket dictionary/thesaurus for Christmas that you can carry around for quick reference. Semantics is the study of the meanings of words and what they represent. Freedom means exactly what it sounds like. As in no restrictions on your religion, or anyone else’s for that matter. The best part is freedom *from* religion. Or, to put it another way, freedom from having the ideological beliefs of your sect being shoved down the throats of others in public schools. Well, I should say the people *were* protected from fundamentalists in the United States, but here in the Christian States they can do whatever they want. It’s their theocratic country and their rules.

“Fundamentalists—in their desperate, grasping, and futile attempts to ward off being relegated to the dustbin of obscurity by the advancing wave of secularism—have gone so far as to get their followers elected to school boards. In order to brainwash more children into their masochistic cult of repression and obedience, groups of ultra-conservative Christians sought to take control of the school curriculums and what information would be available in textbooks. In the 2010 *New York Times* [article](#) *How Christian Were the Founders*, this very issue and specifically the fight over the content of textbooks in Texas was discussed. As Cynthia Dunbar, a Christian activist member on the Texas State Board of Education and graduate of Pat Robertson’s Regent University Law School—please, stop laughing; I’m serious, it’s honestly a real school—said, ‘The philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next.’ In a frightening admission which clearly illustrated the motives behind the Texas State Board of Education attempts to cleanse inconvenient truths from American textbooks, Ms. Dunbar stated in her book, *One Nation Under God*, ‘This battle for our nation’s children and who will control their education and training is crucial to our success for reclaiming our nation.’ Can you say thought control, boys and girls; or Iran, or Saudi Arabia, or the Spanish Inquisition? Of course you can, because we live in this Orwellian nightmare.

“In the same *New York Times* article, professor emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School and ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—no bias there, I can assure you—Martin Marty stated, ‘The more you can associate Christianity with the founding, the more you can sway the future Supreme Court.’ This is a handy little workaround for that annoying problem of judges striking down unconstitutional legislation that favors Christian dogma. But, the ultimate prize for evangelicals would be electing one of their own to the White House. Having the president in the pocket of evangelicals would give them the power to have ultra-conservative judges appointed to the bench, ones who would be sympathetic to their cause and who would not rule against them. This would be particularly useful to their cause, as it is

their stated long-term goal to build a supermajority in both the House and Senate that would pass Christian legislation favorable to their fundamentalist ideology.”

“And that is your idea of wreaking havoc on society?” Miss Trevalio questioned.

“Well, that’s just one of the most notorious examples. But, evangelical Christians have attempted to force their beliefs onto people in other aspects, as well.”

“Such as?” asked Miss Trevalio

“Such as how the New Christian Right also succeeded in blocking the Equal Rights Amendment for women in the 1970s, which was their only significant political win considering they have lost all their other unconstitutional challenges to prayer and creationism in schools. Evangelical and fundamentalist opposition to this legislation was founded upon the ideology that a constitutional amendment giving women equal rights was an abomination for going against biblical authority, which unambiguously declared a woman’s proper place in the pecking order.

“You remember Tim LaHaye of the *Left Behind* books? He and his wife wrote a book together called, *The Act of Marriage*, in which they honestly tried to alleviate the unhealthy sexual repression of uptight married Christians by letting women know it was okay to have sex with their husbands—and enjoy it, too. They examined some causes of unhappiness within the marital bed, including the notion that today’s Christian man may feel emasculated by modern society, where the newly independent woman left them ‘less certain of their manhood than formerly.’ Or, as Tim said in his later book, *Sex Education is for the Family*, men in the new American secular culture were becoming ‘feminized’ or ‘castrated’ by women that asserted themselves.

“I think I see the little, one-eyed, pink monster of jealousy poking out—well, attempting to poke its head out. It seems the religious boys can’t handle the new reality, since their holy books say women should be subservient. Is their manhood that insecure that a confident woman threatens their entire identity? Oh, and Timmy, speak for yourself. Some of us are not threatened by intelligent, driven women. A real man is secure enough in his masculinity to embrace multiple aspects of his personality in combination with changing societal roles without feeling intimidated. In fact, I think it is damn sexy when I see a woman with a brain in her head and the desire to make productive use of her talents, rather than subjugating her identity for the sake of stroking a fragile male ego and compensating for an inadequate manhood.

“And don’t make the mistake of thinking Tim was alone in this type of Neanderthal thinking, as his wife, Beverly, wrote her own book called, *The Restless Woman*. In this book, she berates modern women for daring to leave the kitchen stating, ‘Feminism, despite the external validity of its political program and most (not all) of its social program, was at its core a deep illness. . . . Radical feminists are self-destructive and are trying to bring about the death of an entire civilization as well.’ Do you think she could be a tad more dramatic? So, Beverly likened the modern woman and her goals of personal freedom to bringing the apocalypse down upon us. Wait a second, if you read her hubby’s books, isn’t that *exactly* what millennial Christians want?

“Anyway, she feels women traditionally belong at home supporting their husbands, making them the center of their universe and foregoing their own wants and needs to make sure the master of the home is well pleased. I can’t say I disagree with that sentiment though,” Jeff said joking chauvinistically. “But seriously, it should be the woman’s choice if she wants that kind of lifestyle. It should not be enforced by society, family, religion, or least of all, the man. However, I suppose the woman knows what she is getting into and what kind of primitive or enlightened man she has before she gets married.

“Beverly is joined by another woman, one who helped lead the movement to block the equal rights legislation, Phyllis Schlafly. She is a household name here in the Christian States, thanks to the Texas activists who attempted to remove the references in history textbooks for Thomas Jefferson and the Age of Enlightenment, in order to replace them with the likes of John Calvin, Ms. Schlafly, and other beacons of delumination. Granted, there was a long history of female opposition to attempts at passing equal rights laws, including Ms. Schlafly’s stated objections that it would jeopardize existing legal protections for women, especially for stay-at-home moms. It’s a noble reason and I will give her that much credit, but given her history as a devout Roman Catholic and leader of the Moral Majority, I suspect her outspoken views on the traditional roles of women played a larger role in her opposition.

“Like Beverly LaHaye, Phyllis thought feminism was a threat to society and women should embrace their traditional place in the home as a caregiving, nurturing mother, and supportive, submissive wife. How ironic, considering she was a lawyer and busy activist, though she did support the right for women to choose their own path if they want a career.”

“It is a woman’s right to stay home and allow her husband to provide for her,” Linda declared, without a trace of embarrassment at casting herself in the starring role of helpless maiden.

“Of course it is a woman’s right to choose if she wants to work or not, but it is *her* choice to make, and not some ancient scribbling that makes the decision for her. Perhaps, if men weren’t so threatened by any little challenge to their masculinity, women would have had equal rights all along—and likely, so too would homosexuals.”

“Oh, here we go. Now is when you admit you’re a homosexual and we get to hear the *real* reasons behind your secular agenda—to campaign for gay rights,” Linda scoffed.

“Hardly, babe. I would deflower you in a heartbeat, if I didn’t find your personality and attitudes so morally repugnant. I guess it’s true, beauty is only skin deep.”

“As *if* I would *ever* let you touch me.”

“Have no fear, I prefer my women more open-minded, in so many different ways.”

“You’re a pig.”

“And you’re a prig. Can we stop trading insults now? Why do you people have such a bug up your butts about homosexuality, anyway?”

“The Bible says it is an abomination and,” Linda stated categorically, “it’s unnatural.”

“That is not correct, on either count. Scientists have proven homosexuality exists in nature within other species of the animal kingdom, so you might want to update the references in your *Conformipedia* before you spew forth more medieval and obsolete theories.”

“Humans are not animals,” Linda objected adamantly.

“We are talking monkeys; of course, we are animals.”

“You said humans didn’t descend from monkeys; gotcha!” challenged Linda.

“I thought you didn’t believe in evolution, anyway? Fine, talking primates, if you insist on being pedantic. I was attempting to make a play on words, but I see it sailed over your head.”

“Evolution or not, homosexuality is a sin.”

“Says who?”

“Says the Bible!”

“Well, as with everything else I have deconstructed today, you might want to double-check your original contexts and wording. As to the two passages in Leviticus 18 and 20 that openly condemn it, let me quote Professor Harari again to illuminate this matter, as he is an Israeli historian. In *Homo Deus*—a title unrelated to this topic, I assure you—he wrote about the Iron Age cult of Judaism:

It had no synagogues, yeshivas, rabbis – or even a bible. Instead it had elaborate temple rituals, most of which involved sacrificing animals to a jealous sky god so that he would bless his people with seasonal rains and military victories. Its religious elite consisted of priestly families, who owed everything to birth, and nothing to intellectual prowess. The mostly illiterate priests were busy with the temple ceremonies, and had little time for writing or studying any scriptures. . . .

. . . Hence according to our best scientific knowledge, the Leviticus injunctions against homosexuality reflect nothing grander than the biases of a few priests and scholars in ancient Jerusalem. Though science cannot decide whether people ought to obey God’s commands, it has many relevant things to say about the provenance of the Bible. If Ugandan politicians think that the power that created the cosmos, the galaxies and the black holes becomes terribly upset whenever two *Homo sapiens* males have a bit of fun together, then science can help disabuse them of this rather bizarre notion.

“Moving to the New Testament, you might also be surprised to learn that the original Greek word used in 1 Corinthians 6:9—one of the few passages dealing with this topic that your kind exploits to justify this stance—was catamite. ‘Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind.’ The catamite is the male partner on the receiving end of the sex act, or the word the King James Version used, the *effeminate* one. Note that Paul and the male-dominated society of this era make no mention of lesbianism among their female property, nor do they condemn the giving partner for this act—just the weak one, the submissive one, the *feminine* one. The pitcher is still considered a man’s man and he doesn’t get prohibited from entering into the Kingdom. Now, don’t you find this rationale to be just a *tad* hypocritical and a completely unjust basis for your beliefs in condemning an entire group of people?

Especially, when you *don't even know* what the original text said and in what context it applied!" Jeff blasted, his voice burning with outrage at the ignorance and injustice.

"It's still a sin."

"So, in your minds, these people have no right to be happy, or to be loved like everyone else? They should be miserable and alone, just because your ancient book says so? Do you think a couple of passages from a book that I have repeatedly demonstrated to be full of errors, half-truths, plagiarisms, and corruptions justifies depriving a significant percentage of the population their right to happiness, love, and companionship? Hell, let them get married. If they want to burden themselves with a nagging mother-in-law, who are you to deny them that experience? Everyone deserves to feel loved and no one, least of all the state, has any business regulating what goes on between consenting adults behind closed doors. How would you like it if the state was peeking into your bedroom after you get married?"

"Everyone deserves love and happiness, but with a member of the opposite sex. They are just confused and in need of sexual reorientation counseling," Linda said, obtusely. "We love the sinner, but hate the sin."

"You do realize the operative word here, is *hate*? So, tell me then, wasn't that your older sister I saw on the internet doing lots of naughty things to other women? You know, the one who escaped our little dystopian theocracy and fled to freedom in Hollywood seeking stardom and riches, but ended up doing porn to make ends meet rather than choosing to return here. She is your sister, surely you love her?"

"We don't talk about her. She is dead to us."

"Ah, well, so much for your hollow sentiments of loving the sinner. Your love and tolerance are a shining example to the rest of us—of exactly what kind of a hateful bigot not to be."

Linda was too ashamed to respond to the scathing personal rebuke that struck so close to home, so Jeff continued, "Aren't staunch Republicans the ones always complaining about big government overstepping its mandate, that government should confine itself to things like national security, and not constantly attempting to micro-manage everything? Why the hypocrisy when it comes to same-sex marriage and gay rights? Why is the government allowed to have a say over these particular issues when you are constantly harping on them to mind their place?"

"The government uses wholesome Christian values as a basis for our rights and freedoms," Miss Trevalio said, injecting herself back into the civics class she was supposed to be leading.

"You mean like the thinking that got us eight years of born-again George W. Bush, his faith-based initiatives, and embryonic stem cell research bans?"

"Exactly, so what is your point?" Miss Trevalio inquired.

"My point is that fundamentalist idiots elect other fundamentalist idiots to reflect their ideologies on school boards and in Congress, resulting in embarrassments like the school board fights in Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The C.S.A. has become just like her predecessor, the Confederate States, which was also backward and lacked industrial might. This path is surely the best way to ensure our rapid decline into irrelevance on the global stage. We've been left behind—get it?—as the United States, Europe, and Asia vastly outpace us in scientific, medical, and technological innovations, while we wallow in the Stone Age as our best and brightest minds emigrate to find intellectual freedom and imaginative new discoveries across the border.

"Anyway, I think we've covered the major domestic political issues shaped by your fundamentalist beliefs. Perhaps it's time to go international and look at the evangelical Christian support for the State of Israel as a matter of foreign policy. This support is the keystone of fundamentalist apocalyptic wish-fulfillment, given that a restored Israel is a prerequisite for the triumphal second coming of Jesus and the butt-whipping party he will bring with him. After the Balfour Declaration, Christians eagerly awaiting the second coming were practically wetting themselves in anticipation of seeing Jesus thunder into town behind the four horsemen of the apocalypse, since it is prophesied in Hebrew scripture that the Jews will return to their homeland before the end-times. These rapture-ready believers couldn't wait for the bloody retribution to get started, when Jesus would smite the wicked—which was pretty much everybody, other Christians included—who didn't share their fundamentalist beliefs."

"Where does it say in the Old Testament the Jews will return to their homeland before the end-of-days?" Miss Trevalio asked, picking up her Bible so she could note the passage for future reference.

"In Isaiah 51:11. 'Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away.' In Obadiah 1:17 it also stated: 'But upon mount Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions.'"

“For fundamentalists, the return of the Jews to Israel was surely the most significant indication that the world was about to be redeemed by God and they couldn’t wait for the fireworks to start. Payback is a bitch. And for infidels, their goose was quite literally going to be cooked as God slow-roasted them over the big eternal bonfire. But, like every religious prophecy so far hoping for our imminent demise, Armageddon has once again failed to materialize, and life goes on as usual—despite the fervent wishes of the faithful.

“First, however, these beliefs are dependent upon the destruction of the Muslim Dome of the Rock, so the Jews can be allowed to rebuild their Third Temple. To hard-core fanatics, only that will finally trigger the end-of-days; an understanding derived from Ezekiel 37:26-28, ‘Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And the heathen shall know that I the Lord do sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for evermore.’

“The thinking that would lead some extremists to try and fulfill these beliefs could, quite literally, be the end of the world. Sadly, this came very close to happening during the Camp David Accords in 1978, which led to the subsequent 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, when a group of radical Jews, known as the Jewish Underground, plotted to blow up the Dome of the Rock to disrupt the talks. Fundamentalist Jews reckoned the messiah wouldn’t come with an Islamic abomination sitting atop their Temple Mount, so this group of extremist Jews decided to take matters into their own hands and expedite the messianic age by removing this obstacle to the realization of Jewish prophecy. Perhaps, they assumed God wasn’t moving quite fast enough for their tastes, and they thought this little act of faith might motivate the great cosmic couch potato to get off his ass. I presume they would have been in for a rude awakening when God failed to send the messiah to save Israel from being totally annihilated by the combined forces of the entire Islamic world; but, by then, it would have been too little, too late.

“The only thing that stopped the plot from proceeding, was the failure of the bombers to secure approval from the rabbis to go ahead, due to the long-held Jewish belief that the Third Temple would only be rebuilt after the messiah had brought redemption to Israel. Therefore, it was a major taboo for man to take such an active role, and so the only thing that stopped these fundamentalist nutters from destroying the Dome, was their own fundamentalist messianic doctrine. Karen Armstrong summed up this insanity, thusly:

They were convinced that by instigating an apocalypse here on Earth, they would activate powers in the divine world and “oblige” God to intervene on their behalf and send the Messiah to save Israel.

This was kabbalistic thinking gone mad. It is a terrifying example of the fundamentalist tendency to use mythology as a blueprint for action. . . .

. . . The Dome of the Rock plot represented an abdication of reason, a reliance upon the miraculous, and a nihilism that could have entirely destroyed the Jewish state.

“You can imagine the price we would all have been forced to pay as the majority of the planet was plunged, unwillingly, into a global ideological conflict sown by apocalyptic idiots. Frankly, I doubt most of the people in the world want to pay the piper for the mistakes of religious zealots inspired by corrupted doctrines.”

“Who said the doctrines are corrupted, we believe them to be true,” Miss Trevalio stated, in an ominously serious tone.

“Yes, but you weren’t in the Bible study classes earlier today to know why the doctrines are corrupted. The fact that most of the religious faithful don’t know it, either, is *precisely* the problem. Given the certainty Judeo-Christian fundamentalists have in the truth of their apocalyptic beliefs, blinded as they are by a faith that completely distorts their mental clarity—and if society allowed them to run amok unchecked by reality—they would most definitely trigger an all-out war between Muslims and Jews, with everyone else caught in the crossfire. This apocalyptic nightmare scenario begs the question, where did this evangelical base of support for Israel come from in the first place?

“To cite again from *The Battle for God*:

The Jewish people had been central to the vision of John Darby, the founder of premillennialism. Fundamentalists had been thrilled by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and the actual creation of the State of Israel in 1948 was seen by fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell as “the greatest . . . single sign indicating the imminent return of Jesus Christ;” he saw

May 14, 1948, when Ben-Gurion proclaimed the birth of the State of Israel, as the most important day in history since the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Support for Israel became mandatory; Israel's history was beyond human influence and control, determined by God from all eternity. Christ could not return, the Last Days could not begin, unless the Jews were living in the Holy Land.

"Now, you might be tempted to think that Falwell's support for Israel and that of other evangelical Christians was based on the Christian ideals of spiritual brotherhood and justice for an oppressed people, but you would be sorely mistaken. To reinforce this point Ms. Armstrong stated, 'Protestant fundamentalists were enthusiastic Zionists, but their vision had a darker side. John Darby had taught that Antichrist would slaughter two-thirds of the Jews living in Palestine in the End-time. . . . At the same time as Protestant fundamentalists celebrated the birth of the new Israel, they were cultivating fantasies of a final genocide at the end of time. The Jewish state had come into existence purely to further a Christian fulfillment. The Jews' fate in the Last Days is uniquely grim, since they are doomed to suffer whether or not they accept Christ.' What a nice bunch of loving Christians fundamentalists are, as the slaughter of millions of people is but a necessary evil for the realization of your apocalyptic dreams for the coming of God's Kingdom."

"That is absurd! I don't consider a Jewish genocide to be part of my beliefs," Linda countered.

"Then you can't call yourself an evangelical who espouses literal interpretations, because your fundamentalist forefathers formulated this belief from a strict reading of Zechariah 13:8 as the basis for the prophecy," Jeff said opening a Bible to the verse. 'And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein.' Maybe your preachers have toned down their rhetoric and they don't publicize this bloodthirsty belief that two-thirds of Jews are required to die first, as it would be massively unpopular for them to broadcast such a hateful message. Maybe that explains why you aren't familiar with this particular tenet of your faith. Rest assured, whether you believe it or not, it is a part of the beliefs which constitute the evangelical political support of Israel.

"If you won't take my word for it, how about this related affirmation to urge the politicized Christian Right into action. In the book *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, Hal Lindsey said, 'We need to get active electing officials who will not only reflect the Bible's morality in government but will shape domestic and foreign policies.' What a scary vision your lot has for the rest of us; thank the gods you've never been allowed to implement your frightening schemes."

Miss Trevalio fired back, "So, you think that Israel doesn't have a right to exist or that the United States should not have supported them?"

"First of all, to give this topic the justice it deserves would probably require a doctoral thesis and not a fifteen-minute discussion in a high school civics class, but I will try to give a brief outline of the issues. Second, I think Jews have the same rights to live in peace like anyone else, but there is plenty of blame for the whole Israeli-Palestinian mess to go around. The extremists in Israel have a lot to answer for in their part of the intolerance, blind faith, and the arrogant, dismissive attitudes they have shown the Palestinians. Then again, even some of the secular Jews have some explaining to do, too, such as the original Zionists who were not religious Jews at all."

"What are you talking about? Of course they were religious Jews," Miss Trevalio stated authoritatively.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but the Zionists that worked to reestablish Israel were secular and not religious at all. As Karen Armstrong phrased it, 'For the secular Zionists were quite blatant about their rejection of religion. Their movement was indeed a rebellion against Judaism. . . . Some of them positively hated religion, which they thought had failed the Jewish people by encouraging them to sit back passively and wait for the Messiah. . . . The New Jew would be autonomous, the controller of his own destiny in his own land. But this quest for roots and self-respect amounted to a declaration of independence from Jewish religion.'

"Conversely, the Orthodox Jews were horrified by the efforts of these secularists who dared to intervene in God's plan and take charge of their own destinies. Reading once again from *The Battle for God*, 'As the Zionist movement gained momentum during the last years of the nineteenth century . . . the Orthodox condemned it in the most extreme terms. . . . Any human attempt to achieve redemption or "hasten the end" by taking practical steps to realize the Kingdom in the Holy Land, was abhorrent. . . . Jews *must* remain politically passive. This was a condition of the existential state of Exile. . . . Jews had outlawed political activism, knowing all too well from Jewish history how potentially lethal it could be to incarnate myth in history.' Clearly, there was a very rocky and contentious start to the beginnings of Zionism within Judaism

itself, the conflict with the Palestinians notwithstanding. But, first, it would be helpful to have a very simplified and quick background summary of the historical events that led to the modern troubles.

“The Great Jewish Revolt from 66 to 70 CE which ended in the destruction of the Second Temple, and the later Bar Kokhba revolt of 132 to 135, resulted in the majority of the Jewish population being killed, sold into slavery, or expelled into earlier Diaspora communities by the Roman authorities—though a small population of Palestinian Jews remained behind. If the Jews had never been expelled by the Romans, they would very likely have continued living in their homeland alongside their Palestinian neighbors, the biblically disparaged Philistines. I am not saying there would not have been some periodic conflicts or tension between these two groups, but surely it would have been far less inflammatory and confrontational than the situation that arose during the repatriation of the Jewish community in the twentieth century.

“Earlier, I mentioned the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which opened the door to the Jewish return and led to inevitable clashes with the Palestinian population as the Jewish settlers started to arrive. But, it was the large influx of Jewish people fleeing the rising anti-Semitism of the 1930s in Europe and the Holocaust of World War Two that deepened an already tense situation with the Palestinian natives, who rightly feared the loss of the lands they had been living in for millennia. International consultations on the problem of how to accommodate both the Jews and the Palestinians resulted in the United Nations recommendation for the partition of Palestine into two independent states. This two-state partition was to occur following the end of the British Mandate in 1948 and the withdrawal of their forces.

“Jewish leaders originally agreed in principle to this plan, but overly zealous religious Jews rejected it. They believed all of Israel should belong to Jews, and to Jews alone, because the Bible says the land was promised to them by God. After the Old Testament Bible study class this morning, we now know this selfish and deluded claim is not true, but these facts are an inconvenient truth that undermines the Jewish argument of their divine right to the land. Not surprisingly, this decision also met with fierce opposition from the Palestinians, as they didn’t take too kindly to the idea of having their homeland carved up and given away to the Jews.”

“It was the ancestral home of the Jewish people, too,” Miss Trevalio asserted.

“I never said it wasn’t, but the partition plan called for Israel to receive fifty-six percent of the land—though, a majority of the territorial concession was the uninhabitable Negev desert—even though Jews had, up to that point, only legally purchased property totaling about seven percent of the area. Also, at that time the Jews only comprised one-third of the population, but they were to be given more than half of the land. Echoing this sentiment is prominent Israeli journalist, Gershom Gorenberg, who, in his scathing indictment of Israel’s attitude toward the Palestinians in *The Unmaking of Israel*, stated, ‘The partition map was based not only on the 1947 population of Palestine. It assumed that the Jewish state would absorb up to half a million European Jewish refugees, who did not want to return to their pre-Holocaust homes and were not wanted there. In this sense, the argument that the Palestinians paid for Europe’s crimes is correct.’

“It is not difficult to see why this plan hardly seemed fair to the majority of the Palestinian population and demonstrated a rather one-sided sympathetic favoritism of the United Nations towards the Jewish people. I think it is perfectly reasonable to understand the Palestinian anger, as foreigners were making decisions without their consent and acting with impunity to carve up their state. What must have been even more infuriating to the Palestinians was the fact that they had generously offered the Jews full autonomy within a Palestinian state.

“Don’t you think any native population would be justifiably angered by a foreign power intruding into their domestic affairs? Americans certainly wouldn’t tolerate the audacity of some other country imposing their will on us, as we did with the aboriginal North American tribes, Hawaii, the Banana Republics of Central America; or as the British did in a number of their colonies. Why shouldn’t the Palestinians have protested this unjust foreign imposition, as it was well within their human rights to do so?”

“The Jews were trying to return to the homeland of their ancestors, while the British and Americans were colonizers, not natives to those lands you mentioned,” Miss Trevalio challenged again.

“So, the fact that the Jews were trying to return—after a two-thousand-year absence—makes it okay for them to do whatever they want to the Palestinians? The whole situation could have been handled with a lot more delicacy, respect, and consideration for the people that were living there. Instead, the Palestinians were treated with indifference and dismissive attitudes that did nothing to help the situation but only fueled their rage. Why should the Jews have been given a free pass to ignore the protests of the Palestinians, simply because of the shared religious roots between Western and Jewish traditions, and the guilt over the centuries of anti-Semitic oppression? What goes around comes around, and the bad karma with which these

negotiations were conducted regarding the Palestinians certainly brought the negative energy rushing back in a manner that continues to plague Middle Eastern international relations.

“The Jews may claim they are God’s chosen people and Israel is their Promised Land, but that does not excuse their behavior and the shameful way the Palestinians were treated by just about everyone. In fact, the Jewish extremist attitudes towards the Palestinians are counter to the biblical tenets of charity to their neighbors and in direct violation of Leviticus 19:33-34: ‘And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.’ Gorenberg made exactly the same point: ‘The most basic Jewish memory is that “we were strangers,” we were the minority and were badly done by. In secular terms, this memory derives from long historical experience. Religiously, it is recorded in Judaism’s founding text. The most basic Jewish aspiration should be to do better as a majority when we have the opportunity.’

“Anyway, due to the animosity between the Jews and Palestinians that prevented a feasible transition plan over partitioning the territory into two separate states, the Brits announced they were going to pull out on May 15, 1948 and the region descended into civil war. On May 14, on the eve of the British withdrawal, the Jews declared their new State of Israel. The next day the armies of five surrounding countries invaded and ignited the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which Israel ultimately won, though Jordan annexed the West Bank and Egypt took the Gaza Strip. Between the earlier civil conflicts and the Arab war, estimates range that from seven hundred thousand to almost one million unfortunate Palestinians became refugees. A sizeable number are still living in recognized United Nations refugee camps to this day.

“The rights of these dispossessed Palestinians, and their descendants, to return to their homes has been a contentious issue ever since the war ended in 1948, as Israel has not been playing nice, or fair, by refusing to allow the majority of the refugees to return. And the Israelis wonder why, after years of living in refugee camps, having lost their homes and livelihoods, Palestinians who had nothing left to lose turned to terrorism. It’s a harsh reality, but it was the arrogance of the State of Israel and their self-interested policies that bred generations of discontent in the Palestinian camps. The Jews share responsibility for the creation of this problem in their own backyard, from which their security has constantly been threatened.

“One of the most laughably transparent excuses the Israeli government cited in an attempt to absolve themselves of their responsibility for the prolonged continuation of the refugee crisis was posted on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, claiming that the Palestinians should have assimilated into the countries that took them in.”

“Their website actually stated that publicly?” Miss Trevalio asked in astonishment.

“Indeed, it does; which is pretty sad, because the whole situation is not helped when such irresponsible attitudes are institutionalized by the state. For example, it is the declared public opinion of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the whole refugee situation was the fault of the Palestinians for being unwilling to let half their land be taken, and for not submitting to Israeli authority. According to their own disinformation website, Israel bears *absolutely none* of the responsibility for triggering the mess in the first place.

“I have taken the liberty of printing this from their website, so as not to miss a single syllable of their completely one-sided rationalization,” Jeff said as he retrieved a sheet of paper with a few sections highlighted before continuing. “Their own justifications drip with so much political rhetoric and pathetic [propaganda](#), that I will try not to gag as I read what they have titled: *Who is responsible for the Palestinian refugee problem?*

The immediate cause of the problem was the Arabs’ rejection in 1947 of UN General Assembly Resolution 181 - which would have partitioned the British Mandate area into an Arab state and a Jewish state - and the resulting war started by the Arabs in the hope of destroying the nascent Israeli state. Many Palestinian Arabs who lived in areas where the fighting took place abandoned their homes, either at the request of Arab leaders, or due to fear of the fighting or the uncertainty of living under Jewish rule. A refugee problem would not have been created had this war not been forced upon Israel by the Arab countries and the local Arab leadership.

The Arab countries, with the sole exception of Jordan, have perpetuated the refugee problem to serve as a weapon in their struggle against Israel. The refugees continue to live in crowded

camps, in poverty and despair. No attempt was made to integrate them into the various countries and communities in the region. . . .

. . . Israel does not bear responsibility for the creation or the perpetuation of the Palestinian refugee problem.

“A nice justification, don’t you think? What hypocritical schmucks they are! If I might take the liberty of using their own reasoning against them: alas, if only the Jews had integrated themselves into the societies that had taken them in over the two thousand five hundred years of the Diaspora and didn’t keep themselves apart, they could have gotten on with their lives instead of perpetuating their identity and calls for a return to their homeland. I am verklempt at the chutzpah of the kvetching in their shpiel; it’s meshugas,” Jeff said in his best Long Island accent, imitating Mike Myers from the [Coffee Talk](#) skit on *Saturday Night Live*. “Talk amongst yourselves.”

“I have no idea what you just said,” Linda stated with a blank look on her face.

“It’s Yiddish; a hybridized German-Hebrew dialect spoken by Jews in Europe, from which a few words have been incorporated into English slang. Basically, I said I am all choked up at the nerve of their bitching in that whiny sales pitch; it’s crazy nonsense.”

“Oh, I see,” Linda said, clearly not seeing.

“Sadly for—and apologies to—the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, their story is contradicted by one of their own heroes, David Ben-Gurion, a leader of the Zionist cause and the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel. Unfortunately for this sanitized version of Israeli history, Ben-Gurion was quoted in the book *The Jewish Paradox* by Nahum Goldmann, the President of the World Jewish Congress. Ben-Gurion said:

Why should the Arabs make peace? If I was an Arab leader I would never make terms with Israel. That is natural: we have taken their country. Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them? Our God is not theirs. We come from Israel, it’s true, but two thousand years ago, and what is that to them? There has been antisemitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They only see one thing: we have come here and stolen their country. Why should they accept that? They may perhaps forget in one or two generations’ time, but for the moment there is no chance.

Jeff concluded his rebuke in a mocking paraphrase of Ben-Gurion’s sentiments, “‘No worries, the Palestinians will forget all about losing their ancestral homes in a few generations. Why we Jews were gone for almost two thousand years, and by Jehovah’s beard, we’d forgotten before the unleavened bread even got cold.’ God damn it!” Jeff burst out angrily at such blatant contempt by the Israelis.

“Blasphemer!” Miss Trevalio thundered. “Thou shalt not take the Lord’s name in vain,” she chastised.

“My apologies to the class,” Jeff offered. “My emotions got the better of me due to the scale of this heartbreaking human tragedy; especially as there is more evidence from Ben-Gurion to counter this shamelessly transparent load of disinformation from the Ministry of Flatulent Adaptations that the entire episode was wholly unnecessary. Once again, Gorenberg took aim at the brutal treatment meted out to the Palestinians in *The Unmaking of Israel*:

In April . . . the Haganah went on the offensive. It aimed at taking control of the land assigned to the Jewish state, opening the road to Jerusalem, and preparing for defense against the coming Arab invasion. In some places, Jewish commanders expelled Arabs from conquered villages. In many more, panic led to mass flight, especially after Irgun and Lehi fighters perpetrated a massacre in the village of Deir Yassin outside Jerusalem. By early May, Shertok was speaking of the “astounding” and “unforeseen” Arab exodus, as if describing an unexpected inheritance. Going back to the status quo ante was unthinkable, he said. When the provisional government discussed the issue in June, the consensus, supported by Ben-Gurion, was to keep the refugees from returning. A later cabinet consensus—supported by Ben-Gurion—was later to keep the refugees from returning. A later cabinet decision said that “a solution to the refugee problem” would have to be a part of a formal peace agreement. The policy was partly defensive, to avoid a fifth column. But in the June cabinet meeting, Shertok also described all “the lands and the houses” as “spoils of war,” and as compensation for Jews had lost in a war forced on them.

Afterword, as the fighting continued, cases of the IDF expelling Arabs grew more common. The decision to prevent return was the turning point, transforming what began in the chaos of war into a choice.

“Alas, if the Israelis had acted humanely and decently towards the Palestinians in the first place, perhaps this whole unfortunate situation could have been avoided, or at least alleviated to a great degree. I feel the need, once again, to quote the Hebrew scriptures since Israeli extremists haven’t figured out that they are the cause of their own troubles, and it is from the heights of hypocrisy that they have the audacity to blame the Palestinians for reacting the way they have. Perhaps, if they had ever bothered to study their Bibles, they would have known about Hosea 8:7 which proclaims: ‘For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.’ Maybe then they might have realized that fostering such impotent rage within their midst was an inherently unwise strategy, and, just maybe, they would have acted like decent human beings towards the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people.

“In a sadly ironic twist of fate, the whole two-state scenario has come full circle since the United Nations partition plan of 1947, with the creation of an independent Palestinian National Authority following the Oslo Accords in 1993. If only cooler heads had prevailed in the beginning, the years of suffering, endless wars, skirmishes, and terrorist atrocities could possibly have been avoided. Today, after all the struggle and violence, many Israelis agree that the West Bank and Gaza Strip should become the homeland for a fully independent Palestinian state. But, only time will tell if this solution can ever be fully and finally realized.

“Unfortunately, adding to the injustice of the problem is Israel’s continuing encroachment on Palestinian lands by building illegal settlements. There is nothing like a little religious fire in the belly to inspire zealots, which is especially dangerous to Israeli security when these deliberate provocations continually stir up Palestinian anger. I just hope for the sake of humanity that Israeli extremists can stop acting like arrogant, self-righteous pricks who feel they are the elect of God entitled to the land. They need to grow the hell up and stop blocking attempts to find a fair solution to the problem.”

“You’d better be careful with your opinions, Mr. Spicoli, or you will be branded as anti-Semitic for your criticisms of Israel,” Miss Trevalio warned.

“Yes, I am sure I would get unfairly tarnished with that baseless accusation, and what a load of crap it would be, too. The Israelis like to use the tactic of declaring any criticism of them as being anti-Semitic in an effort to try and silence opposition to their questionable actions. Well, they have over-played that hand too many times and they can’t use it constantly in order to get away with whatever they want. As proof, Israeli politician, Shulamit Aloni, stated matter-of-factly during a 2002 [interview](#) on an episode of *Democracy Now!* called *Israel’s First Lady of Human Rights* that Israel deliberately hurls accusations of anti-Semitism at anyone who dares to call them to account for their treatment of the Palestinians, in order to bully their critics into shamed silence. Sorry, but the Holocaust doesn’t give them a trump card to play every time someone says something they don’t happen to like. And, if history demonstrates anything, it is that the Jews are resilient in the face of much harsher circumstances than mere words. Furthermore, what group is more anti-Semitic than extremist Jews themselves?” Jeff asked controversially.

“I fail to understand your reasoning, Mr. Spicoli. How can the Jews be anti-Semitic to themselves?” Miss Trevalio wondered.

“This may be news to you, Miss Trevalio, but the Jewish people do *not* have a monopoly on being Semitic. While a strict definition of anti-Semitism applies only to Jewish discrimination, it can theoretically include other Semitic peoples such as the ancient Akkadians—those who wrote the *Epic of Gilgamesh*—the Canaanites, Phoenicians, and Arabs among others.”

“Oh, well, I didn’t realize Arabs and other peoples were also Semitic. Still, I think it is a bit of a stretch to say that extremist Jews are anti-Semitic. However, I really don’t think you are qualified to make such sweeping judgment calls on Israeli matters,” Miss Trevalio admonished.

“Why, because I’m not Jewish I can’t have an opinion? Fine, I’ll quote directly from the Hebrew Bible which is full of passages with denigrating comments about their Semitic neighbors, and from some prominent Jews who have said *exactly* the same things I have.”

“What passages?” Linda inquired.

“The most blatant example of Jewish anti-Semitism comes from 1 Samuel 15:3. ‘Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.’ The commandment to kill the Amaleks is one of the six hundred thirteen mitzvot of Mosaic Law that Jews are—or perhaps were—required to follow as part of their faith. This passage in 1 Samuel was derived from one of these mitzvot, specifically, from Deuteronomy 25:19.

‘Therefore it shall be, when the Lord thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.’ In the case of modern Jewish extremism, some radicals have extended the definition of the Amaleks to include the Palestinians as a convenient weapon in their arsenal of hatred. They claim this is a fundamental belief of their religion, and wrap their intolerance up with a big, pink bow of religious faith. Genocide justified in the name of religion as a cover for territorial acquisition—it brings a tear to the eye.”

“You can’t be serious,” Miss Trevalio uttered in sincere disbelief at the shocking revelation.

“Oh, I am deadly, and I do mean deadly, serious. Their own scriptures amply testify to, and from which, the ultra-zealous claim a justification for ridding all the biblical land of Israel of any non-Jews. These radical Jews are every bit as extreme and violent as their Muslim counterparts in God’s terror squads. As Karen Armstrong so aptly described it in her book, ‘The *mythos* of Genesis thus became the rationale for a political program of ethnic cleansing.’ One of the most violently overt examples came in 1980 when a fanatical rabbi, Israel Hess, published an article titled, *Genocide: A Commandment of the Torah*, in which he advocated for the extermination of the Palestinians as descendants of the Amaleks, and as commanded by God, that they be wiped off the face of the earth.

“A righteous call for the extermination of an entire people within thirty-five years of the Holocaust, the irony is too shocking to even comment. I will leave you to contemplate the significance of such a barbaric paradox for yourselves. Now, as you may have guessed the Amaleks were not only a Semitic tribe, but according to their very own holy texts—Genesis 36:12 to be exact—they would be cousins of the Hebrews as descended from Jacob’s brother, Esau. Given that this family feud never ends, perhaps the Jews and all their Semitic cousins should go on a daytime talk show and have a good redneck-time slapping the hell out of each other, and just get it over with once and for all.

“Further, Shulamit Aloni, the politician I referred to a moment ago, and who previously served as the Minister of Education, in a 2003 [article](#) for *Counterpunch* aptly titled, *Murder Under the Cover of Righteousness*, wrote: “Many of our children are being indoctrinated, in religious schools, that the Arabs are Amalek, and the bible teaches us that Amalek must be destroyed.” This brainwashing is fostering a whole new generation of children being raised in an atmosphere of intolerance, ignorance, and hatred towards the Palestinians. So, I ask again, who is more anti-Semitic than extremist Jews themselves with their blatant lack of human decency towards their Arab cousins?

“Of course, not all Jews stand idly by and let this kind of hatred go unopposed. Moderate and secular Jews are horrified by these extremists and seek to distance themselves from the fanatical, inhuman, and racist distortions of their religion, just as Christians and Muslims are of the wackos in their own traditions. For example, Peace Now is a group of enlightened Israelis who seek to influence public opinion and lobby their government for a fair and honest settlement with the Palestinians. At their rally on June 3, 1989, the outspoken Israeli novelist and influential journalist, Amos Oz, [said](#) of the Jewish fanatics:

A small sect, a cruel and obdurate sect, emerged several years ago from a dark corner of Judaism; and it is threatening to destroy all that is dear and holy to us, and to bring down upon us a savage and insane blood-cult.

People think, mistakenly, that this sect is struggling for our sovereignty in Hebron and Nablus . . . and this end justifies all the means at their disposal—including those dripping with blood. But the truth is that, for this cult, the Greater Land of Israel is merely a sophisticated ploy to disguise its real aims: the imposition of an ugly and distorted version of Judaism upon the State of Israel. . . .

. . . The real aim of this cult is the expulsion of the Arabs so as to oppress the Jews afterwards, to force us all to bow to the authority of their brutal false prophets.

“Then there is Noam Chomsky, a professor of philosophy and an extremely vocal Jew who is critical of the State of Israel. Chomsky objected to the founding of Israel as a Jewish state, its heinous policies towards the Palestinians, and he openly criticizes the United States government for its foreign policy support of Israel. Chomsky [wrote](#) in *Israel, Lebanon, and the “Peace Process”* in 1996: ‘It is well to remember that Israel’s actions, however one assesses them, are conducted with virtual impunity. As Washington’s leading client state, Israel inherits the right to do as it chooses.’

“Unfortunately, the elected governments of Israel are continuously caught in a tug-of-war. The coalition governments need to appease the far-right religious hardliners to stay in power, but these extremists keep causing problems with their constant antagonisms, thus preventing any meaningful, lasting peace settlements with the Palestinians. Christopher Hitchens described this situation in a 2010 *Slate* [article](#) called, *Israel’s Shabbos Goy*, in which he cited several appalling facts. Allow me to read it in part:

Those of us who keep an eye on the parties of God are avid students of the weekly Sabbath sermons of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. In these and other venues, usually broadcast, this elderly Sephardic ayatollah provides an action-packed diet that seldom disappoints. A few months ago, he favored his devout audience with a classic rant in which he called down curses on the Palestinian Arabs and their leaders, wishing that a plague would come and sweep them all away. . . . Why on earth should anybody care about the ravings of this scrofulous medieval figure? . . . Well, one reason is that he is the spiritual leader of the Shas Party, an important member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition. Indeed, two key portfolios, of the Interior and of Construction and Housing, are held by Shas members named Eli Yishai and Ariel Atias.

Yishai recently delighted the Diaspora by saying that only those Jews who converted via the Orthodox route could carry “the Jewish gene.” Atias has expressed alarm about the tendency of Israeli Arab citizens to try to live where they please—or “spread,” as he phrases it—and has advocated a policy of segregation in housing within Israel proper. He also advocates the segregation by neighborhood of secular from Orthodox Jews, adding that he does not wish his own children to mix with their nonreligious peers. It is Yishai’s ministry that is famous for making announcements about new “housing” developments outside Israel itself and in legally disputed territory. Very often, Netanyahu himself has claimed to be taken by surprise at these announcements, which usually involve tense areas of Jerusalem. . . .

. . . Now we read that, in return for just 90 days of Israeli lenience on new settlement-building (this brief pause or “freeze” *not* to include the crucial precincts of East Jerusalem), Netanyahu is being enticed with “a package of security incentives and fighter jets worth \$3 billion” and a promise that the United States government would veto any Palestinian counterproposal at the United Nations. Netanyahu, while graciously considering this offer, was initially reported as being unsure whether he “could win approval for the United States deal from his Cabinet.” In other words, we must wait on the pleasure of Rabbi Yosef and Ministers Atias, Yishai, and Lieberman, who have the unusual ability to threaten Netanyahu from his right wing.

“In this article, Hitchens confirmed the repeated claims made by Chomsky, that the U.S. routinely vetoes initiatives at the United Nations to block Palestinian motions for statehood in favor of their client state. Stating verbatim from the *New York Times* [article](#), *A 90-Day Bet on Mideast Talks*, that Hitch referred to:

In return, the Israelis would receive 20 advanced American fighter jets and other unspecified military aid, as well as American promises to oppose any Palestinian attempt to obtain international recognition of statehood in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza without Israeli agreement.

The United States would veto a United Nations Security Council resolution along those lines and actively work against similar resolutions in forums where it does not have a veto.

“I don’t know about you, but I think that kind of blatant favoritism is extremely unfair to the Palestinians. This policy stance only serves to fan the flames of anti-American sentiment, which is hardly in the best interests of international diplomacy, nor does it set a shining example of balanced American foreign policy objectives.

“Unfortunately, Israel gets away with their inflammatory behavior, because they are like the kid on the playground who mouths off to everyone knowing that his big brother is standing behind him. I realize American policy recognizes that a strong Israel is key to the stability of the Middle East, and politicians are forced to walk a fine line, but I fail to see how such one-sided partisanship can be in the long-term best interests of all the players—the West, Israel, or the Middle East. If the United States took away their unconditional security, the Israelis would likely be forced into having to be a lot more conciliatory and willing to play nice in order to get along with others. But, as long as they’ve got the United States backing

them up, they feel they can do whatever they want and get away with it. So, maybe the Israelis should stand on their own two feet and put their money where their mouth is, or else they should shut the hell up and start acting like responsible, global citizens, and not spoiled, entitled little brats.

“Finally, to sum up, our whole discussion on the American Christian Right and their fundamentalist obsession with the rapture and how that translates into foreign policy support for Israel, I will return to the Frank Schaeffer [blog](#) I cited previously:

Convincing folks that Armageddon is on the way, and all we can do is wait, pray, and protect our families from the chaos that will be the “prelude” to the “Return of Christ,” is perhaps not the best recipe for political, economic, or personal stability, let alone social cohesion! It may also not be the best philosophy on which to make serious American foreign policy decisions. . . .

. . . That said . . . the evangelical/fundamentalists—and hence, from the early 1980s until the election of President Obama in 2008, the Religious Right as it informed U.S. policy through the then-dominant Republican party—are in the grip of an apocalyptic Rapture cult centered on revenge and vindication. This End Times death wish is built on a literalist interpretation of the Book of Revelation.

“So, after all this background history—admittedly a very simplified version—do you really think that either the United or Christian States should support a blatantly discriminatory Israeli regime with our foreign policy objectives? Particularly, as the evangelical Christian support for Israel is really only a fundamentalist means to an end in the hopes of triggering the second coming.”

“I’m at a loss for words, Mr. Spicoli. I really don’t know what to say. I have never heard any of this, or had it put to me quite that way before. It is a rather shocking revelation, to be honest,” Miss Trevalio admitted.

“It is indeed very shocking. Christians should be ashamed of the complete lack of love, charity, and basic human kindness for the Palestinians, just so they can condone Israel’s appalling behavior in the name of some twisted prelude to the rapture. After the Holocaust, you would think Jews would have been more sensitive to the plight of a dispossessed and downtrodden people. But Jewish fundamentalists, who insist that Israel was given to them by God and that the borders of Israel should be as they were defined in the Bible, feel they can just take what they think is theirs by divine right. Then they turn around and blame the Palestinian terrorists for the situation, when the Israelis had a huge part in creating it with their own zealotry and arrogance. Their attitude stretches the limits of reason, going far beyond being shamelessly hypocritical to being depressingly ironic. In reality, their fanatical prejudice just makes the whole situation that much more frustrating to watch.

“Due to the terrorism that has arisen because of the Palestinian refugee situation, there have been calls for moderate Muslims to reach out and embrace Islamic extremists, to bring them into the mainstream fold and reeducate their zealous ideologies. Of course, moderate Muslims do condemn Islamic extremism, and the perversion of their faith that is used to justify horrific acts fills them with dread and sadness. But, where is the same worldwide condemnation and cries for moderate Jews to rein in their prodigal Israeli brothers who continue to cause problems by building state-sanctioned illegal settlements in Palestinian territory?

“Considering all I have explained today about the evolution of the religious dogmas common to all three monotheistic faiths that have their roots in ancient Israelite mythology, including the facts presented by archaeologist Israel Finkelstein which demonstrated that the pre-Josiah biblical narratives are merely pious histories, isn’t it time for the billions of followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to put away the childish fantasies of this imaginary past? Isn’t it time we stopped holding ourselves mentally hostage to ancient superstitions? Shouldn’t we all start using the reason and enlightenment of our twenty-first-century intellects, instead of inciting hatred over these mistaken, outdated, and ultimately baseless religious claims?”

“Our beliefs are our beliefs. The scriptures tell us the Jews are the children of God and that Israel’s rise will herald the return of Jesus,” Linda stated firmly, as if she hadn’t heard a word of what Jeff had said all day.

“So, even though American foreign policy is causing so much blowback we should just continue the status quo because you hope all this regional tension will trigger Armageddon?”

“I don’t know what blowback is,” Linda admitted.

“Blowback is exactly what it sounds like: when something goes wrong and all the smoke from the unintended consequences blows back into the faces of the American public. The best example of one of our total foreign policy clusterfu—pardon me—blowbacks is Operation Ajax.

“Ajax, like the cleanser?” Linda asked.

“No, not like the cleanser.”

“I have never heard of Operation Ajax,” Miss Trevalio confessed.

“Of course, the majority of the American public does not know anything about it. Many Americans can barely find their own state on a map, how can we expect them to know what happened on the other side of the world over fifty years ago?”

“What do you mean Americans can’t find their own state on a map?” Miss Trevalio asked, insulted by such a broad condemnation of the education system of which she was a part.

“According to the results of a 2006 [study](#) commissioned by the *National Geographic Society*, six percent of young adult Americans can’t find the United States on a map, fifty percent couldn’t identify New York or Mississippi, with less than half being able to find Ohio.”

Miss Trevalio huffed in resignation at the truth, “Fine, point taken. Now, please explain what Operation Ajax is and why it was such a disaster in terms of American foreign policy.”

“Sure thing, Miss Trevalio. As with America’s recent Persian Gulf Wars—despite all the objections and mock indignation to the contrary—Operation Ajax was all about oil; specifically, Iranian oil. In 1953 a joint British-American coup was staged that overthrew the *legitimate* government of a *sovereign* nation and propped-up the puppet-king of the West, the much-despised, Shah Pahlavi. Operation Ajax came about in response to the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company by the democratically elected, and I stress, *secular* government of Iran. However, the Western powers weren’t very happy with the Iranian Prime Minister seizing Iran’s oil industry for domestic rather than foreign benefit, foolishly thinking he should be able to call the shots in his own country.

“The shah, with his Western-backed authoritarian rule, bred so much discontent that the situation eventually sparked the 1979 Iranian Revolution which brought to power a hardline Islamic regime that has plagued international relations ever since. The blowback is pretty obvious: the British-American interference in the domestic affairs of an independent country, one with a secular government eager to modernize and join the industrialized community of nations, had the unfortunate result of blowing up in everyone’s faces and causing the foreign policy nightmare of the last forty years. If the Americans and the Brits had just kept their noses out of other people’s business, Iran would likely have continued on its secular and modernizing journey. Instead, it turned into the fundamentalist breeding ground that sponsors state terrorism and is so openly hostile to the West.”

“I see,” Miss Trevalio said solemnly, as the facts sank in. “I can certainly understand why the Iranians don’t like America very much if we really did interfere with their internal politics like that.”

“Yes, it is understandable why deliberate American interference has put so many noses out of joint. Unlike Americans—who have the attention span of a mosquito and no awareness of current affairs beyond a potato in Idaho that looks like Jesus—the people that have been on the receiving end of American foreign policy tend to remember the injustices perpetrated upon them. Other people have long memories about foreigners meddling in their domestic affairs, long after Americans have forgotten that there had been some disturbance in a far-off speck of land we can’t even find on a map.

“How would Americans feel if say, during the Bush/Gore election fiasco, another country unilaterally decided we were obviously unfit to govern ourselves and a team of United Nations observers was sent in to monitor the election process for us? Can you imagine the public outrage if some other country did to us *exactly* what we’ve been doing since the Monroe Doctrine declared that it was American policy to intrude in another country’s affairs whenever we see fit? Then we sit back and wonder why there is so much anti-American sentiment.”

“I never really looked at it from that perspective before,” reflected Miss Trevalio honestly.

“You and about ninety percent of the rest of Americans have never bothered to consider it, either. Maybe it’s time we all started thinking about how American foreign policy over the last sixty years or so has alienated entire generations of Muslims from Palestine to Iran, and their Islamic brethren in other countries by association. We helped fuel their discontent and have demonstrated, over and over, how we hand them the short end of the stick. Yes, we brought freedom to Iraq and Afghanistan, liberating their populations from brutal oppression. We have protected tens of thousands of people through noble peacekeeping initiatives and helped millions with aid money. But, this doesn’t excuse the examples of gross misconduct

from our past. Americans proclaim we fight for freedom, but staging interfering coups in Iran, and continuing our unfair and hypocritical foreign policy of actively inhibiting the legitimate interests of the Palestinians with our one-sided support for Israel, says otherwise. It absolutely staggers the imagination that the West can't understand why the Muslim world is so pissed off with us and the Israelis."

"You are openly vocal in your disdain for Judeo-Christian beliefs, and yet, you seem to sympathize with Muslims. So, I take it you agree with the Muslim extremist views that the State of Israel should be abolished, and you condone the actions of Islamic terrorists in their fight for Palestinian rights?" Miss Trevalio challenged.

"No, that's not what I said. There you go putting words in my mouth, again. I never said Israel should cease to exist or that Jews shouldn't have security in their homeland, but the ends do not justify the means. Israelis could have tried harder to peacefully coexist with the Palestinians, if only they had just followed their own Golden Rule: do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. While not approving of terrorism or extremism from any side in this conflict, I can fully appreciate the frustration of the Palestinian people and understand where their anger comes from, and why it is directed at Western culture—which, remember, they view as interfering with negative repercussions on their society. Also, don't forget your perspective, as one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist, and the Palestinians are fighting for their homes against insurmountable odds. Have you ever stopped to imagine yourself in their situation and asked what lengths you would go to in order to fight for your home?"

"Besides, Islam has historically been rather tolerant of other faiths. It was primarily in the twentieth century, after the creation of the State of Israel and the rise of Palestinian terrorism in response to the refugee crisis, that the extremists have painted the whole faith with the same tarnished brush. Islam, in general, has gotten a bad rap in the Western media, when it is only a very small percentage of extremists who are causing all the problems. Similarly, most Christians are peace-loving moderates and not all hate-filled, sign-waving, funeral-stalking morons; like our Westboro brethren down the road."

"What about the sword verses in the Qur'an commanding all Muslims to slay pagans and idolaters if they don't convert?" Miss Trevalio inquired.

"What about the bloodthirsty, genocidal passages in the Hebrew Bible? What about the Crusades and the Inquisition? Give me a break. All religions have some questionable elements in their traditions, but the danger comes from the overly zealous faithful, with their intolerant and strict literal interpretations and a complete lack of rational thinking. The Muslim extremism of today has more to do with the ultra-conservative and intolerant interpretations that evolved out of Saudi Wahhabism, than with the five pillars of Islam. Two of the five pillars relate to being mindful of the less fortunate: the ritual fasting of Ramadan, which reminds the faithful of the suffering of those in need; and the giving of alms to the poor. Doesn't that sound familiar to the civil rights and obligations of Deuteronomy, or the charitable views of Jesus and Paul?"

"Mostly, this extremist ideology is a function of the lack of socio-economic opportunities available to most people in third world Muslim countries. This is similar to the high rates of crime we see in America that are disproportionately correlated with the undereducated, inner-city poor. Yes, the 9/11 attackers were college-educated engineers. But, by and large, many of the poor, dumb suicide bombers are barely educated, impressionable cannon fodder manipulated into doing the dirty work for terrorist leaders too cowardly to do it themselves.

"I would like to quote Karen Armstrong one last time," Jeff stated, as he opened his copy of *The Battle for God* to two more highlighted passages, "to sum up our little walk through the history of fundamentalist doctrinal revisions:

We shall often find in our story that the religious behavior of people who have not been major beneficiaries of modernity articulates a strongly felt need for the spiritual, which is so often either excluded or marginalized in a secularist society. . . .

. . . Religion did not disappear after all, and in some circles it has become more militant than ever. In all three of the monotheistic faiths, fundamentalists have reacted angrily to attempts to privatize or to suppress religion, and have, as they believe, rescued it from oblivion. It has been a hard struggle and in the course of it, the faith has often been distorted; this represents a defeat for religion.

"So, there you have it, my evangelical classmates. From your pious ancestors and their fears of modern society abolishing religion, which resulted in the evolution of the warped doctrines of inerrancy and literal interpretations of the Bible, they used this new perspective as a reassuring baby pacifier in an uncertain

world. And from this fear of uncertainty, your fundamentalist ideology grew into the ludicrous parody which you inflict onto the American political landscape to such an incredibly absurd degree.”

And with that, the bell rang, and a gratefully relieved Miss Trevalio dismissed the class.

Chapter 10:

Legend: A lie that has attained the dignity of age.
H. L. Mencken

We Join Our C.S. History Class, Already In Progress . . .

“. . . and with their infinite foresight, the founding fathers saw the wisdom of creating a Christian state here in the New World. Christianity, in its unchanging, divinely inspired glory—”

“Um, excuse me, Mr. Hand,” chimed in Jeff, the perpetual walking encyclopedia.

“Don’t interrupt me, Mr. Spicoli. As I was saying, Christianity, with its constant message has brought salvation to countless numbers over the centuries and became the foundation upon which our great country was built by our noble ancestors, the Puritans.”

Losing patience and not waiting to be called on, Jeff blurted out, “Surely, you realize many of the founding fathers were not Christians, but Deists? For those of you scratching your heads, deism is a philosophy that emerged during the Age of Enlightenment of belief in the one God, but that rejected notions of traditional religious dogma. The founding fathers, in this regard, were not explicitly Christian, and Christianity is certainly *not* unchanging.”

“Mr. Sp—”

Jeff cut him off and kept right on going, fueled by his exasperation at the obtuse mindset all around him. He had literally reached the end of his rope and didn’t care anymore about the consequences of speaking openly or forcefully, so he barreled on with his arguments. “Don’t you realize that rabbinical Judaism today is as different from the Temple sacrifices in the time of Jesus, as Second Temple Judaism was from the pre-exile period? Just as Judaism evolved over time, Christianity is also fundamentally different today from its beginnings. Religions don’t stay static and unchanging; they constantly morph over time. So, how can you state that Christianity in its unchanged form was the bedrock on which the United States was founded, especially when you are wrong on both counts?”

“I am not wrong on either count,” Mr. Hand stated forcefully. “The American colonies were founded on Judeo-Christian ideals and the main message of Christianity, that Jesus was the Son of God, has been consistent from the beginning.”

“No, it hasn’t. While the belief in Jesus as divine had some early followers, it didn’t become official doctrine until centuries later. In the early days of the Christian faith, there was never a single, unified idea of who Jesus really was, and today the various denominations still have different interpretations. To state that Christianity is unchanging is to demonstrate a complete lack of historical understanding about the religion and the implications of the major theological evolutions that go with it. Professor Ehrman pointed this out in his book, *Lost Christianities*, where he wrote: ‘The early Christian church did not consist of a single orthodoxy from which emerged a variety of competing heretical minorities. Instead, earliest Christianity, as far back as we can trace our sources, could be found in a number of divergent forms, none of which represented the clear and powerful majority of believers against all the others. In some regions of ancient Christendom, what later came to be labeled “heresy” was in fact the earliest and principal form of Christianity.’

“I bet you didn’t know that at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine played a decisive role in deciding the nature of Jesus. It was Constantine’s influence that ultimately led to the acceptance of the Trinity formulation that became orthodox doctrine, not an independent Church.

“Why would the Roman emperor be concerned with what Christian doctrine said about the nature of Jesus?” Linda asked.

“That’s a great question, specifically given that the empire was tolerant of so many different religions, so why should Constantine have cared about the mumbo jumbo of each varying sect’s mythology? Before I get into that, first you need to know some background details. Essentially, like Akhenaten and Josiah before him, Constantine took a fringe cult and gave it state backing. By granting Christianity legitimacy, he endowed it with a longevity without which Christianity probably would have died out—like so many other faiths that didn’t have the support of official sanction. Understanding how and why he did it are matters of a political nature that need to be examined in the context of the time and circumstances of his rule.

“By 324, Constantine had succeeded in winning a civil war for total control of the Roman Empire after defeating Licinius, the eastern emperor, reuniting the eastern and western halves under a single rule, as the

Empire had been split in two by Diocletian in 286 to more easily administer the sprawling territories. This east-west split was later permanently reinstituted in 395 after the death of Emperor Theodosius I, which laid the foundations for the Eastern Roman—later known as the Byzantine—and the Western Roman Empires. This split roughly aligned with Greek-speaking, Eastern Orthodox and Latin-speaking, Roman Catholic halves.

“The Christian lore surrounding Constantine started after he became the sole emperor in the western half, after defeating his rival claimant, Maxentius, at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, where it was asserted he converted to Christianity. Later legends say he received a vision of the cross along with the words: ‘By this sign, you will conquer.’ However, it wasn’t a cross, but a Chi Rho or a labarum,” Jeff explained, walking to the board and scribbling an X with a long-stemmed P passing through the middle. “It was this symbol, created by combining the Greek letters from the first two letters in Christ, Chi and Rho, which Church history claims Constantine had painted on the shields of his soldiers.”

“Interesting, I didn’t know that,” Mr. Hand said. Along with a lot of other things, Jeff wisely thought to himself. “Continue please,” the teacher directed.

“It is generally considered that this was the moment when Constantine became a Christian, but there are a lot of not-so-comfortable little facts that conveniently tend to be overlooked by those of faith. First, Constantine attributed his success to a *supreme deity*, but he never said it was Jesus. Christian writers, like Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea and author of the Church’s *Ecclesiastical History*, later claimed Constantine *meant* to say Jesus. Constantine also claimed two years before his victory at Milvian Bridge that Apollo had appeared to him in a vision. Could this be the same supreme deity who foretold his victory? Seems our boy has a history of seeing things, and one might suspect today that he was in need of psychiatric care.

“Constantine was also quite fond of representing himself on coins of the realm as a sun god, with solar rays projecting from his head. This suggests a calculated association with Apollo, the Greek god of the sun, and Sol Invictus—the Unconquered Sun—a popular pagan sun cult among Roman soldiers. Don’t forget, Constantine was a victorious general. The Church also has a notorious tendency towards revisionist history, and they were famous for editing out inconvenient references to pagan symbolism and other deities in favor of Jesus—case in point Eusebius’ history. So, what are the odds the labarum wasn’t the sign he supposedly saw and painted on the shields, but a popular myth perpetuated by the Church that was retroactively inserted into the battle history?”

“There could be a grain of truth to the legend of the shields,” Mr. Hand countered.

“I will grant you that, but I was just mulling over likely suspects of Christian propaganda, given Constantine’s continuing non-Christian behavior after his supposed spiritual awakening.”

“What kind of non-Christian behavior?” Mr. Hand inquired.

“Well, in addition to the solar imagery, intriguingly, he also refused baptism until his deathbed almost twenty-five years after his alleged conversion. Don’t you find that odd, that a supposedly devout Christian would delay his baptism? Though, some scholars insist he was a truly devoted Christian after his conversion for the rest of his life. To get around this fact, these scholars attribute the delay to the harsh realities of running an empire and needing to make difficult or unpleasant decisions, and that a later baptism would cleanse him of these stains of leadership. Basically, he waited to wipe the slate clean before his heavenly final exams. However, his track record just doesn’t seem to add up for a person with an overtly Christian attitude, as other scholars argue. Specifically, these scholars argue that Constantine chose Christianity for one overwhelming reason, forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness?” queried Linda.

“Yes, forgiveness. The troubling thing was that Constantine had a shameful skeleton in his closet. He had a wee bit of—shall we say, and forgive me for going all Hindu on you—bad karma staining his soul. Constantine had his second wife, Fausta, executed after she falsely accused his firstborn son and imperial heir, Crispus, of trying to seduce her in an attempt to discredit him and get her own sons on the throne. Her scheming, which ultimately did succeed in getting her sons into power, resulted in Constantine having Crispus imprisoned and slated to be killed before the truth of her treachery came to light. Unfortunately, his orders to stop the execution were delayed in reaching the prison and Constantine was consumed with guilt for being duped by his conniving wife into wrongfully killing his beloved son. Pagans, while being a deliciously sinful bunch, still had a problem with him wiping out two people in the heat of anger—a patently *un-Christian* thing to do. Constantine, the poor old bugger, couldn’t catch a break from the pagan priests.

However, one of the fundamental tenets of Christianity, and Jesus was big on this one, come on say it with me, is . . .”

“Forgiveness,” muttered Linda quietly. “Okay, but what does all this have to do with a Roman emperor being the one to decide Christian orthodoxy regarding the nature of Jesus?”

“As Constantine had several fires to put out, he had hoped that the Church’s empire-wide administrative network could be a useful organizing force to restore order across the vast regions under his control. However, rather than order within the ranks of the Church, there were bitterly heated divisions over the nature of Jesus, and these diverging doctrinal arguments were threatening to tear the Church apart and fuel further discord throughout the empire. Edward Gibbon described this situation in his masterpiece, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, volume 2. The bishops were riled up over the issue of whether Jesus was God himself or created by God. This difference of opinion sparked vicious arguments, and it was all centered around the minuscule change in pronunciation between the two Greek words for same and similar, as ‘furious contests which the difference of a single diphthong excited’ among these two opposing camps.

“Constantine probably wasn’t particularly concerned with the minutiae of Christian religious doctrine, if he even knew or cared what it was in the first place, he just wanted the bishops to stop squabbling like petulant children and causing him more headaches. So, he convened the Council of Nicaea calling together the bishops to debate their issues. Of the roughly three hundred who attended, only five came from the Latin churches in the West and the bishop of Rome was *not* one of them; a point I will come back to shortly.

“Constantine wanted the bishops to settle their disputes once and for all; or, so he hoped. Most bishops were on the side of Arius, the priest whose teachings sparked the council to determine the precise nature of God. Arius, like many others, taught the belief that Jesus, though still God, was subordinate or *similar* to the Father who had created him. This belief was in direct opposition to the trinitarian camp who believed that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were one and the *same*. Crucially, however, most of the bishop’s didn’t agree with this new position on Jesus, and due to Constantine’s politically motivated interference in swaying their vote, the arguing continued for generations. Church historians don’t publicize that even though Arius was exiled after the council for his newly branded and officially certified heretical beliefs, he was later pardoned by Constantine and welcomed back, while some of the winning opponents were subsequently disgraced and banished. Most amusingly, the bishop who finally baptized Constantine on his deathbed—Eusebius of Nicomedia—was a supporter of Arian beliefs. What does that tell you about the legitimacy and acceptance of the Trinity doctrine?

“History professor Howard Drake proposed in *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* that Constantine was concerned by a desire for unity above all else and worked to establish a consensus, whether the bishops agreed theologically with the Nicene formula or not. This strategy ultimately worked, as only two dissenting bishops voted against what became the Nicene understanding of Jesus being the same as God. So, because a Roman emperor backed the scripturally *unsupported* doctrine of one particular sect, you, my dear Christian classmates, ended up with the Trinity as an orthodox tenet of your faith. Further, Constantine provided tax breaks to the Church, and I guess money talks, a concept which applied just as much back then as it does today in generating compliance with policy.”

“You have to be making that up,” Linda objected. “Surely, such an important Christian doctrine wasn’t decided over a simple thing like taxes.”

“If you don’t believe me, would you listen to one of the most respected theologians in Christian history, Gregory of Nazianzus, Archbishop of Constantinople, also known as Gregory the Theologian, a Cappadocian Father, and a Doctor of the Church? During the following years, the issue of the divinity of Jesus stayed pretty much unresolved, while bishops continued teaching whatever doctrine they pleased. In 371, after Emperor Valens split Cappadocia into two provinces, a power struggle emerged between the bishops of the now two dioceses, Anthimus of Tyana on the Arian side and the trinitarian Saint Basil of Caesarea, which highlighted the ongoing doctrinal conflict and the continued use of taxation tactics. Gregory commented on this twice, once in his *Orations*, and again in one of his autobiographical poems where he noted, ‘Souls were the pretext, but the real cause was desire for power. I hesitate to say it, but the wretched fact is that it is revenue and taxes that motivate the whole world.’

“Subsequent emperors, including Constantine’s son who held the Arian view, continued insinuating themselves into the ongoing and heated debates over the nature of Jesus, and the constant flip-flopping over which doctrine received official imperial sanction. This was perfectly illustrated by Constantius II at the Council of Milan which he called in 355. The views of Constantius II were recorded by Athanasius of

Alexandria in his book, *History of the Arians*, where he [stated](#), ‘Whatever I will, be that esteemed a Canon; the Bishops of Syria let me thus speak. Either then obey, or go into banishment.’ Despite his efforts to inject his personal views into the doctrinal debates, the councils called by Constantius II, who was written off as a heretic, are not counted among the major general assemblies of the Church.

“Athanasius was an extremely vocal champion of the trinitarian side which won at Nicaea; in fact, it was his protests against Arius which sparked the Council in the first place. Recall I just mentioned that Arius was pardoned and some of his opponents were banished. Guess who was one of them? The trinitarian zealotry of Athanasius did not win him any friends, as he was exiled five times by four different emperors for his vigorous opposition to the Arians; including his antagonisms of Constantius II. He is also the earliest source to have listed, in 367, the twenty-seven books which comprise the New Testament canon.

“Further, Constantius II called the Western bishops together in 359 at the Council of Ariminum in northeast Italy, where the Nicene orthodoxy was overturned due to a complete absence of any trinitarian basis ‘according to the scriptures.’ Saint Jerome—who translated the Bible from Greek into Latin, which became the Vulgate, the Vatican’s official version—documented this dramatic turn of events in his *Dialogue Against the Luciferians*, [writing](#): ‘The Nicene Faith stood condemned by acclamation. The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian.’ Another of the Church Fathers, Socrates Scholasticus or Socrates of Constantinople, [noted](#) the new creed approved at the council in his *Church History*:

We believe in one only and true God, the Father Almighty, the Creator and Framer of all things: and in one only-begotten Son of God. . . . As for the term substance, which was used by our fathers for the sake of greater simplicity, but not being understood by the people has caused offense on account of the fact that the Scriptures do not contain it, it seemed desirable that it should be wholly abolished, and that in future no mention should be made of substance in reference to God, since the divine Scriptures have nowhere spoken concerning the substance of the Father and the Son. But we say that the Son is in all things like the Father, as the Holy Scriptures affirm and teach.

“As more emperors came and went, each having their own wavering opinion, favorable tax status was bestowed or revoked at will for sycophantically following the imperial whim of the hour. Ironically, the successor to Constantius II, branded Julian the Apostate, restored paganism and rescinded the imperial benefits that had been granted to the bishops by Constantine. Julian was so-named, contemptuously, because he turned his back in disgust on his Christian upbringing due to all the vicious infighting and senseless destruction that came out of this loving and tolerant religion. Julian, relying on his Christian education, wrote a stinging rebuke of the entire trinitarian spat in *Against the Galileans*, [stating](#):

But as for the commandment “Thou shalt not worship other gods,” to this surely he adds a terrible libel upon God. . . . Lay aside this nonsense and do not draw down on yourselves such terrible blasphemy. For if it is God’s will that none other should be worshipped, why do you worship this spurious son of his whom he has never yet recognised or considered as his own? This I shall easily prove. You, however, I know not why, foist on him a counterfeit son. . . .

. . . But you are so misguided that you have not even remained faithful to the teachings that were handed down to you by the apostles. And these also have been altered, so as to be worse and more impious, by those who came after. At any rate neither Paul nor Matthew nor Luke nor Mark ventured to call Jesus God.

“Sadly, Julian would be the last of the non-Christian emperors, as later emperors reinvested the bishops with the imperial favor that allowed Christianity to displace paganism and take over the last millennia and a half of Western history. It was not until Emperor Theodosius called the First Council of Constantinople in 381, more than fifty years after the Council of Nicaea, that the Nicene orthodoxy finally received official and continued imperial endorsement. However, bickering and in-fighting among the bishops continued over their dissenting views.

“Within fifty years, more battle lines would be drawn between opposing camps, this time sparked by an interpretation from the bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius. Nestorius, seeking to find the middle ground between the factions who believed God had been incarnated as a human and those who believed it was impossible for God to be born, advocated for the idea that Jesus had two separate and distinct natures: divine and human. The camp that insisted God was born as a man in Jesus was using the title Theotokos, God-bearer, to refer to Mary. As a compromise, Nestorius put forward the concept of Christotokos, the messiah-

bearer; which, though counter to the trinitarian stance of the Nicene era, was more closely aligned with the earliest Christian ideas of Jesus as the messiah and not as divine. Of course, plausible suggestions and a more accurate description could hardly have been expected to carry the argument. Just as the challenge against Arius had come from his bishop in Alexandria, the next major fight also came from a later bishop, Cyril, against his counterpart from Constantinople. Incensed by this heresy, Cyril threw the gauntlet and the bishops started taking sides, as each sought to line up their support.

“Oxford professor, Peter Frankopan, described this situation in *The Silk Roads*: ‘The problem, as they saw it, lay in the sloppy translation into Greek of the Syriac term describing the incarnation – although the argument was as much about jostling for power between two leading lights in the church hierarchy, and the kudos that came from having one’s doctrinal positions accepted and adopted.’ So, yet again, another emperor needed to call a council to deal with these prickly drama queens and their never-ending cat-fights. At the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Ephesian formulation of a single substance was declared, in which Jesus had both human and divine natures, but was only of one being. This council also officially bestowed the title of God-bearer on Mary, which played a key role in the origins of Mariology I mentioned earlier. Professor Frankopan continued, ‘Outflanked and outmanoeuvred by Cyril, Nestorius was deposed, a move that destabilized the church as bishops hastily changed their theological positions one way and then another. Decisions made at one council could be challenged at another, as rival factions lobbied fiercely in the background.’

“Continuing the pattern of bribery I noted from Constantine and Gregory of Nazianzus, can anyone take a guess what I’m about to say?” Jeff asked.

Foreseeing another challenge to the purity of her beliefs about to blow up in her face, Linda stated sullenly, “Just rip the bandage off, and get it over with.”

“When playing the game of bishop’s thrones, they played to win. Nestorius accused Cyril of spreading malicious lies and using bribes to win supporters; a pattern of behavior confirmed by Cyril’s own hand. One of Cyril’s most infamous letters listed, in exquisite detail, how much he paid out, and to whom, ‘in order that he would help us in the cause about those matters which were written to him.’ While scholars are not entirely sure from when this letter dates exactly, it is thought it relates to his post-Council efforts at reinstatement, as one of the recipients of his generosity was the emperor’s sister. After the Council, he found himself deposed just like Athanasius after Nicaea, and he bought his way back.

“Continuing on, it seems the intervening years and many post-Nicene councils didn’t do much to put this issue to rest, as the bishops continued to argue over the precise Christological nature of Jesus, and another council needed to be held. The next, at Chalcedon in 451, where those who argued for what ultimately became the Western Christian orthodoxy still held today, argued with stubborn Nestorian holdouts to accept the trinitarian view of the divine nature of Jesus. In order to address the on-going dissent against the Ephesian formula, this council produced yet another creed, stating that Jesus had two complete natures: simultaneously human and divine. These two later councils finally solidified the new, improved, confused, and paradoxical divine/human trinitarian orthodoxy.

“There are two interesting points about the Council of Chalcedon. The first relates to the ongoing political interventions of the emperors to influence the trinitarian formulae at the various councils. Oxford University Professor of the History of the Church—and with a title like that he knows what he’s talking about—Diarmaid MacCulloch, hosted a brilliant and comprehensive six-part *BBC* documentary in 2009 called, *A History of Christianity*. In the first episode, *The First Christianity*, Professor MacCulloch wryly commented on the situation:

Emperors longed for unity. Inconveniently for them, Christians repeatedly valued truth rather more. A hundred years later, in 428, a clever but tactless scholar was appointed the new bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius. Bishop Nestorius wasted little time in plunging the Church into a fresh quarrel about the nature of Jesus. It would end the unity of the Church once and for all, and in the process, consolidate Eastern Christianity as a distinct and formidable force. . . .

. . . At first, Cyril seemed to have the upper hand. He had Nestorius hounded out of Constantinople and banished to a remote Egyptian prison. But Nestorius’s supporters remained, and so, once again, a Roman emperor was left fearing that his state would fracture. He had to call yet more councils. Eventually in 451, the bishops of the empire gathered just across the straits from Constantinople for another landmark council in Church history. The Council of Chalcedon met to define the future of Christian faith. The Council . . . tried to do

what all emperors want: to sign up everyone to a middle-of-the-road settlement. When you do that, it always helps to have a few troops around. So, the council decreed a compromise.

In essence, it backed Nestorius's oil and water emphasis, that whilst here on Earth, Christ, the divine and human being, was 'recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change.' But in a nod to Cyril's followers, it straight away added 'without division, without separation.' And that compromise is how the Churches which descend from the emperor's Christianity—the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—have understood the mystery of Jesus ever since. . . .

. . . The losers at the Council of Chalcedon refused to fall into line; it was a watershed. Imperial and non-imperial Christianity would never be reconciled. Instead, something new happened. The Church split for the first time, something that would happen many more times in its history. The imperial Church now found itself focused solely on the Mediterranean—it had no choice; Eastern Christians were not going to be pushed around by the emperor. But unlike their Western cousins, Christians in the East would now have to survive in the midst of hostile and alien religions, without the backing of an emperor.

"The split between Western, imperial, Chalcedonian Christians of the Mediterranean—which, confusingly, includes the Eastern Orthodox—and the Eastern, non-imperial, Oriental Orthodox Churches, became known as the Chalcedonian Schism. Those with dissenting views, such as Cyril's followers, split off to found denominations like the Syriac Orthodox Church in Antioch, later known as the Jacobite Church; or the one in Alexandria, Egypt which subsequently became known as the Coptic Orthodox Church. Of course, followers of the Oriental Orthodox Churches do not recognize the legitimacy of the Council of Chalcedon and its pronouncements.

"Additionally, in 410, between the Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus in the Roman West, was the Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in the capital of the Persian East. This council organized Christians in the Sasanid, or Neo-Persian, Empire into the Church of the East. It was here, after losing out at Ephesus, where Nestorian Christians would make their mark. Professor MacCulloch went on to note: 'Nestorius died in exile in Egypt, but his supporters helped build a Church independent of both imperial Christianity and the Syriac Orthodox Church.' The autonomous Church they helped build, was the Church of the East, alternatively known as the Nestorian Church.

"Despite the Western Euro-centric view of Christian history and the role European Christianity assigned itself as the dominant player within the Christian world, the facts tell a different story. Professor MacCulloch explained, 'The origins of the Christian faith are not in the West, but here in these ancient churches of the East. For centuries, Christianity flourished in the East, and indeed, at one point it was poised to triumph in Asia; maybe even in China. The headquarters of Christianity might well have been Baghdad, rather than Rome.'

"Professor Frankopan detailed how the early Church was much more of an Asian one, and the oft-times quarrelsome relationship with their Western brethren:

By the middle of the sixth century there were archbishoprics deep within Asia. Cities including Basra, Mosul and Tikrit had burgeoning Christian populations. The scale of evangelism was such that Kokhe, situated close to Ctesiphon, was served by no fewer than five dependent bishoprics. Cities like Merv, Gondēshāpūr and even Kashgar, the oasis town that was the entry point to China, had archbishops long before Canterbury did. . . . Indeed, even in the Middle Ages, there were many more Christians in Asia than there were in Europe. After all, Baghdad is closer to Jerusalem than to Athens, while Tehran is nearer the Holy Land than Rome, and Samarkand is closer to it than Paris and London. Christianity's success in the east has long been forgotten. . . .

. . . The church in Persia, which had not seen eye to eye with its western peer for more than a century and whose senior clergy increasingly saw themselves as the transmitters of the true faith – in contrast to the church in the west which had been systematically corrupted by deviant teachings. As the bishops of Persia put it when they met in 612, all major heresies had sprung up in the Roman Empire – unlike in Persia, where 'no heresy has ever arisen.'

"It is the Nestorian Church in Persia that leads us to the second interesting point about the Chalcedonian Schism, that being Chalcedon's indirect influence on the rise of Islamic doctrines, as these Christians helped

influence Muhammad's understanding of Judeo-Christian monotheism. In 325, the Sasanian empire conquered the northeastern Arabian Lakhmid kingdom and made them a vassal state. Christians in the Sasanian Empire were Nestorian, so when a Lakhmid king converted, prior to the rise of Islam, it was to Nestorian Christianity.

"Also, in northwest Arabia were the Ghassanids, originally non-Chalcedonian Christians from Yemen who migrated north and became a client state of the Byzantines by 473, and converted to imperial, Chalcedonian, Christianity over time. In the southwest, were two other related kingdoms. Just across the straits of the Red Sea separating Arabia and Africa, was the Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, whose king converted to Christianity shortly after the Council of Nicaea. Around the time of the Council of Constantinople, in modern Yemen, the king of the Himyar people converted to Judaism. Himyar then became absorbed into the Kingdom of Aksum in 525. Between the Ghassanids and the Himyarites, along the western coast of central Arabia, is the Hejaz, where Mecca and Medina are located; and here, a large population of Jews not only lived but exerted considerable power. *The New Cambridge History of Islam* explained:

Medina's large Jewish population was dispersed in both ... Lower Medina, in the north and ... Upper Medina, in the south. ...

... The oldest stratum in the Arab population of Medina was made up of members of the Balī and of other tribes, many of whom converted to Judaism. The Aws and Kazraj, who settled in Medina at a later stage, became known under Islam by the honorific appellation al ansar (the helpers). ... The Jews suffered a setback, or the Khazrajī 'Amr ibn al Itnaba would not have become the king of Yathrib in the last quarter of the sixth century. But by the advent of Islam the main Jewish tribes Nadīr and Qurayza had regained their power.

"Therefore, prior to the emergence of Islam around 610, there were already many competing Judeo-Christian monotheistic orthodoxies among the Arabian ruling class in various regions, as *The New Cambridge History of Islam* continued:

Strains of monotheism (rabbinic and non rabbinic Judaism, varieties of Christianity and Jewish Christianity being its principal forms) may not have been as strong among the Arabs of the mid Peninsula as they were among those in the south ... but they seem to have been stronger than the Islamic tradition describes them.

Things are less clear in Arabia than we would wish them to be, but monotheism had certainly gained a solid foothold well before Muhammad. ...

... Very telling is the testimony of the Qur'an itself, which, whatever the precise course of its assembly and transmission, clearly has its origins in seventh century Arabia. It is telling in two respects. The first is that it can be read to suggest a geography of belief in which the supreme God (Allah) was acknowledged as the creator, and where lesser deities are called upon principally to intercede with Allah. According to this view (or a version of it), the old gods were in decline and the power of the supreme God was in the ascendant; Muhammad's movement, it follows, accelerated a progress already in train. ...

... The Qur'an is telling in another respect. It claims to express a 'clear Arabic', but it is an Arabic that may have been clearer to its contemporaries than it was to scholars of subsequent periods. In fact, a very conservative seventh and eighth century tradition of textual transmission has ironically conserved the text's polyglot origins: Qur'anic language actually accommodates not only a wide range of non Arabic loanwords, but also, perhaps, a Syriac Christian substrate of language and belief, which, though hardly detectable elsewhere, is what we might expect to find, given that Arabia was geographically and culturally contiguous to the heartland of Syriac Christianity. ... The fact is that terms as crucial as *Qur'an* and *sura* are Aramaic in origin, and postulating a Syriac substrate can unlock several obscure passages, while others are resolved by positing referents in the biblical, exegetical and liturgical traditions of eastern Christianity.

"The evidence pointing to the Judeo-Christian influence on Islam is blatantly obvious, from the fact that the Qur'an and Muslim traditions claim direct descent from Abraham through Ishmael; they believe in an end-times judgment with resurrection and hellfire; they revere the tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron; they

built the Dome of the Rock atop the ruins on Temple Mount; and Muhammad's revelation was said to have come from Gabriel, a name which only appears twice in the Hebrew Bible, as the angel who revealed the prophecy to Daniel; and twice in the New Testament, in Luke 1, where Gabriel announces the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Professor Frankopan pointed out an interesting observation by contemporary Christians, 'Even in the 690s, in other words, there was a blurring of religious boundaries. So close, in fact, did Islam seem that some Christian scholars thought its teachings were not so much those of a new faith as a divergent interpretation of Christianity. According to John of Damascus, one of the leading commentators of the time, Islam was a Christian heresy rather than a different religion. Muhammad, he wrote, had come up with his ideas based on his reading of the Old and New Testaments – and on a conversation with an errant monk.'

"Just as Josiah's reforms were political, and the emperors and Roman bishops used economics, so, too, were the origins of Islam tied in with money and politics. Once again, Professor Frankopan noted the pragmatism of certain decisions which led to a greater uptake of the new faith:

The Ka'ba, the old focal point of the polytheistic, pagan religion in Arabia, was identified as the cornerstone for prayer and pilgrimage within the city. This was revealed as having been set up by Ishmael, the son of Abraham and the putative ancestor of twelve Arab tribes. . . . By confirming the Ka'ba as sacred, continuity was affirmed with the past, generating a powerful sense of cultural familiarity. In addition to the spiritual benefits offered by the new faith, there were obvious advantages in establishing Mecca as a religious centre par excellence – politically, economically and culturally. It defused antagonism with the Quraysh to the point that senior members of the tribe pledged their allegiance to Muhammad – and to Islam. . . .

. . . Securing greater resources was important, for it was not just the spiritual rewards on offer that won people over to Islamic teaching. Since the appearance of Muhammad, one general is purported to have told his Sasanian counterpart, 'we are no longer seeking worldly gains'; the expeditions were now about spreading the word of God. Clearly, evangelical zeal was vital to the success of early Islam. But so too was the innovative way that booty and finances were shared out. Willing to sanction material gain in return for loyalty and obedience, Muhammad declared that goods seized from non-believers were to be kept by the faithful. This closely aligned economic and religious interests.

Those who converted to Islam early were rewarded with a proportionately greater share of the prizes, in what was effectively a pyramid system. This was formalised in the early 630s with the creation of *dīwān*, a formal office to oversee the distribution of booty. A share of 20 per cent was to be presented to the leader of the faithful, the Caliph, but the bulk was to be shared by his supporters and those who participated in successful attacks. Early adopters benefited most from new conquests while new believers were keen to enjoy the fruits of success. The result was a highly efficient motor to drive expansion.

"Further, events don't occur in a vacuum, they are interconnected. The protracted Byzantine-Sasanian War of 602-628, along with their Arab Christian proxy states, left both empires exhausted and vulnerable to the advancing Arab armies that swept out of Arabia in 632. *The New Cambridge History of Islam* summed up the situation:

It was Arab strength rather than Sasanian weakness that was the principal factor. It was a combination of . . . the driving faith of the Muslim community . . . and the priority given to the conquest of Iran that generated and sustained an external force great enough to overwhelm the resources of the Sasanians and to overrun the whole of Iran within twenty years of the Prophet's death. The reasons for the priority for the conquest of Iran rather than the rump of the Roman empire might be . . . Islam acknowledged its affinity with Christianity, but could not but set itself against Zoroastrian dualism. . . . The issue of priority is crucial. For it is plain that Byzantium was ripe for the taking by the early 650s, and that it was ultimately saved by the outbreak of civil strife within the caliphate in 656. Then, and only then, were the Byzantines able to revive their spirits and reactivate the ideology of a Christian, Roman, world shaping power.

“There are other Judeo-Christian similarities, as some scholars think Islam was originally apocalyptic, sparked by the socio-economic uncertainty of the Byzantine-Sasanian War, and warning of the impending end-times—just like the Judaism that emerged from Daniel and preached by Jesus and his followers; then all three adapted their theology into long-haul organized religions. *The New Cambridge History of Islam* continued:

The dynamism ascribed to the early Believers during their rapid expansion from Arabia into Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Iran might be well explained by another kind of religious motivation, namely that the movement may have been inspired by apocalyptic speculations. Conviction that the Last Judgement was imminent is exactly the kind of idea that is sufficient to cause people to drop their normal way of life and join a cause in the interest of their own presumed salvation at the End Time. The idea that Muhammad and his followers may have been inspired by apocalyptic concerns . . . was long given a cool reception by most Western scholars, and is staunchly opposed by most devout Muslims. In recent years, however, the idea has again gained some favour, particularly because evidence for apocalyptic concerns in the later seventh and eighth centuries CE has become more abundant.

“Tying the historic contextual background together with the Judeo-Christian influences, is Peter von Sivers, professor of history at the University of Utah, who in a 2017 lecture at Brigham Young University titled, *Islamic Origins*, [noted](#):

The Lakhmids were part of the eastern Arabs. Their king converted in 594 to Nestorian Christianity. . . . Now, he converted to Nestorianism, and then one of the sources says once he had converted, that he chased the Jacobites from the provinces. So, in other words, only Nestorians now remained in the east among the eastern Arabs. . . . Now, the eastern Arabs had established their form of Christianity as dominant in the eastern steppe. . . .

. . . So, let me now show you what the Qur’an has to say about these tritheists: ‘O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah Jesus, the Son of Mary, was but a Messenger of Allah and His Word which He directed to Mary and a soul from Him. So believe in Allah and his messengers. And do not say “Three;” desist—it is better for you.’ (Q 4:171)

. . . The Qur’an is actually very friendly towards both Jacobism, Monophysitism, and Nestorianism; and in fact, in many ways, comes out of Nestorianism. . . .

. . . I would say: look now, there are Christian roots and these roots, furthermore, appear in the Qur’an in mostly convergent form, so that there is actually a lot of commonality between Christianity and Islam. And if you are willing, then we count you Muslims among those who inherited the common concordance, heritage, of Judaism and Christianity; even though Christianity within itself was, of course, deeply conflicted. So, we are heirs of all three things, and so the Muslim—the Islamic Qur’anic revelation—is therefore just another version of the revelatory tradition that comes out of the Middle East. . . .

. . . Among ourselves, if we open ourselves to what the Christians had to say about the rise of Islam in the 600s . . . then we would come to the conclusion the origins of Islam can be nicely compared to what Christianity was all about in the 500s, and all of the problems that it experienced; you see them continued here in the origins of Islam.

“Holy Christopher!” Mr. Hand blurted out. “I had *no* idea Islam was so closely related to Christianity.”

“You, along with two or three billion other Christians, Jews, and Muslims. *A little* insight goes a *long* way, but it’s a shame no one ever takes the time to disarm their prejudices about other religions with a few readily available facts. Related to the long-term changes within Islam, is the little known scholarly opinion that the Qur’an was not actually written by Muhammad in the seventh century. The core ideologies, once again, need to be understood against the backdrop of the socio-political climate of the seventh century; just as the Hebrew Bible needs to be contextualized with the events that happened in the seventh century BCE. Professor von Sivers explained:

In 622, right when the [Byzantine-Sasanian] war was beginning to turn in favor of the of the eastern Romans, they [monotheists of Medina] declared an Arab kingdom. This is very

important that this Arab kingdom was declared at that particular time, because actually, from the Islamic tradition that the sources that are dated 200 years after the emergence of the early Muslims, 622 is which date? The date of the hijra, the immigration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, and in Medina, then, the organization of the early Islamic community according to the Islamic tradition. . . .

. . . There is a connection here between the Islamic sources of 200 years later, and what the Christian chroniclers of the 600s say, only it's being described a little differently. Instead of a hijra of a prophet by the name of Mohammed migrating from Mecca to Medina, we are talking about an Arab Kingdom emerging, and right from the start this Arab Kingdom, according to one Christian chronicler, consisted of two leaders and two sides. And this is perhaps the most important source here for the understanding of the beginning of Islam, because we are talking about probably western Christianized Arabs forming one side, eastern Christian Arabs forming another side, and each had a leader. . . .

. . . From what I am saying here, we have to assume that it came together as a scripture between 602 and sometime towards the end of the 600s; and when I say 602, that's of course the time when the eastern Christian Arabs dispersed in the Syrian desert. Note by the way, that I'm not saying anything about Mecca and Medina. I'm merely talking about the eastern and western Arab Christians in the Syrian desert. . . .

. . . We cannot use the Islamic tradition, anymore. Let me give you the example: the Muhammad biography, the so-called *sīra*, was composed, the final version, in 823. That is for the first time the source where we then learn about Muhammad was born in 570, he grew up in Mecca, he has his first revelations in 610, and so on and so forth. . . .

. . . I mentioned this idea here of convergence, so in other words, if you know about these Christian roots that Islam has—Islam did not emerge *sui generis* out of the revelations that Muhammad received on a mountain near Mecca. . . . We know about Muhammad, for example, only because a biography was written two hundred years later. The word Muhammad appears only three times, as such, in the Qur'an. So, we do not even know who revealed the Qur'an. For all we know is what we talk about as the revelation of the Qur'an was the communal work of scribes who were deeply steeped in all of the scriptures of Christianity, including all the non-canonical ones of previous centuries, and put together what we can maybe call a concordance of all of the Christian writings; this is the original meaning of Islam, by the way.

“Expanding the points of Professor von Sivers about the textual compilation, and specifically challenging the Muslim notion that Islamic written traditions—unlike the Bible—have never undergone translation and erroneous revision, is *The New Cambridge History of Islam* and modern scholarly perspectives:

Another trend in Western scholarship on early Islam, also developing first in the late nineteenth century, challenged the assumption of the source critics that the information in the traditional Islamic narratives represented copies of early documents or the verbatim reports of actual eyewitnesses. Instead these scholars, whom we may call advocates of the Tradition Critical Approach, argued that the reports we find in the Islamic sources were in most cases merely the capture in written form of oral traditions about the past. These traditions had diverse and often uncertain origins, and had undergone a period of oral transmission of indeterminate duration; hence, they could be used to reconstruct events of the past only with great caution, because it is usually impossible to know what material may have been dropped, added or changed in the course of transmission. . . .

. . . The problem of the instability of orally transmitted reports was exacerbated by the likelihood that many of the early written compilations from the second and third centuries AH in which such reports are found were themselves transmitted orally; that is compilers of early written works often transmitted their material to their students by lecturing. Hence many ‘books’ exist in two or more recensions traceable to the notebooks or other records made by different students of the work’s compiler. [Scholars] have vigorously debated the question of

the stability of the texts of the early ‘books’ of which we have knowledge, or even whether they originally existed in the form of books at all, rather than just as collections of notes. . . .

. . . The historian viewing the gradual crystallisation and elaboration of ‘classical’ Islamic civilisation would surely consider this to be a process that spanned four to five centuries, from the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the late sixth century until at least the eleventh century. It took this long for the crucial questions of communal identity to be resolved and for the religious doctrines, legal and political institutions, and cultural and social practices that we consider typical of fully developed ‘classical Islam’ to emerge from the robust debates and disparate materials of the early Islamic centuries. For example, the institution of Muslim *qadīs* or judges, or the systematised law they administered, or the concepts of the Prophetic *sunna* and scholarly consensus (*ijma’*) that were among the fundamental principles of this law, were all things that emerged at the earliest only a century after the time of the Prophet.

“Wow, you’re really hell-bent on pointing out the political basis of all faiths, aren’t you?” Linda asked, somewhat ominously. “The Muslims certainly won’t like you pointing out these direct challenges to their deeply held beliefs.”

“Well, Linda, you know what your Bible says.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That much is perfectly obvious. Read John 8:32 for us.”

Linda flipped open her Bible and read, ‘And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’

“The problems are, most people don’t want to know the truth, or be free; they just want to be told what to do and think. Anyway, I think I have covered enough background on how the sectarian divisions at the Council of Chalcedon influenced Islam. I should probably get back to the topic of Christianity, after veering off on that little tangent.

“Chalcedon did not end the arguments, and yet another council was called by Emperor Justinian in 553, the Second Council of Constantinople, to deal with ongoing dissent to the Chalcedonian formula by those congregations who rejected this dual nature of Christ. This Council reaffirmed the condemnation of Nestorius, but it also had another interesting thing happen. You remember Origen, the guy who denounced Celsus for mocking Christianity as a religion of ignorant nobodies, and who first conflated the fall of Satan with Isaiah 14? At this Council, he and his writings were declared anathema, along with Evagrius Ponticus, the zealot who concocted the list of deadly sins refined by Gregory the Great. Saints one day, sinners the next. One more losing spin of the wheel of misfortune that was the game of ever-changing Christology.

“Therefore, beliefs that are considered orthodox today, like the divine nature of Jesus and the perpetual chastity of Mary, didn’t become standard doctrines until *hundreds* of years after his death. If the Jesus-as-God faction had failed to become the dominant and orthodox voice, what would Christian beliefs look like today? There were various sects of Christianity with differing beliefs, such as a group of Jewish Christians who may or may not have been part of the original Jerusalem Church, known as the Ebionites. The Ebionites considered Paul a heretical Jew, and rejected the notion of the divinity and virgin birth of Jesus, likely as they knew the Gentile interpretation was based off the Greek mistranslation and they were familiar with the original Hebrew wording in Isaiah. What if the Ebionites had succeeded in having the most widely held beliefs and the greatest number of followers in the Church? The last fifteen hundred years of history and the proclaimed orthodox doctrines would have been vastly different. I highly doubt we would be celebrating Christmas, and perhaps not Easter, either. Christians only have this very particular set of trinitarian beliefs due to an accident of history, as things could have possibly gone in any number of non-trinitarian directions at the slightest capricious fancy of any given emperor.

“What is really puzzling to me, is that most Christians don’t know *any* of this history, and yet it is a major doctrine central to their beliefs. If Christians are going to make a devout belief the core of their entire lives, don’t you think they owe it to themselves to know where these beliefs and doctrines came from? Are there even legitimate reasons for the faithful to believe these half-baked ideas? Or have these beliefs just been given the benefit of the doubt, sanctioned by a group of historically ignorant followers who have lent these beliefs respectability, simply through sheer force of numbers and the passage of time?”

“Watch yourself, Mr. Spicoli. You are skating on thin ice. The very fact that Christianity thrived is proof that God’s will prevails, and that the true message of Jesus, the one that has been communicated, is the right one,” Mr. Hand stated circularly. “All your historical points don’t change the underlying fact that the Church

fathers were still right about Jesus being God. And it *is* supported in the scriptures, contrary to what you stated.”

“No, the Church fathers weren’t right. Their views just had the most adherents among several other Christian sects, with varying degrees of belief, in who they thought Jesus was—and the majority makes the rules. The group that claimed the belief in Jesus-as-God merely silenced those with different interpretations, who were thereafter branded as blasphemers and heretics for daring to have a different opinion. This group only succeeded after Constantine rubber-stamped their views and supported this doctrine as—and I need to stress this point—one of the *many* religions that still existed in the widespread and diverse empire.

“People tend to forget, as their minimal historical understandings of early Christianity are colored by tales of persecuted Christians being fed to the lions in the Coliseum, that historically, pagan Rome was very tolerant of the widely differing cultural beliefs and local religions in the territories under their dominion. Constantine and his co-emperor, Licinius, signed the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, ending the Christian persecutions that had restarted under Diocletian. Many Christians like to point to this event as the time Christianity became the official state religion within the empire, which is incorrect, as the Edict merely extended toleration to all faiths.

“However, someone should have given Connie a dictionary to look up the meaning of the words tolerance and irony. Constantine was quoted in the *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea, as [saying](#) in reference to decoupling the observance of Easter from Passover at the Council of Nicaea:

And first of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul. For we have it in our power, if we abandon their custom, to prolong the due observance of this ordinance to future ages, by a truer order, which we have preserved from the very day of the passion until the present time. Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way. . . . But supposing these reasons were not of sufficient weight, still it would be incumbent on your Sagacities to strive and pray continually that the purity of your souls may not seem in anything to be sullied by fellowship with the customs of these most wicked men.

“I guess the ignorant bugger didn’t realize Jesus was a Jew, that the Last Supper was the Jewish Passover feast, or that Christianity built on and borrowed so much from Judaism.

“As to your point about the New Testament supporting the Trinity doctrine, that is not entirely true, either. Constantine and the Trinitarian Church fathers had backed the Church into a scriptural corner, and once this doctrine had been decided theologians needed to scour the Bible to find justifications for the new position. One problem, it was not there. Oops! Holy Christopher, what were they going to do now? Within one hundred years from the Council of Nicaea, Augustine was insisting that the Bible needed to be *reinterpreted* in such a way to make it support the recently proclaimed Trinity doctrine. Or, as he [wrote](#) in *On The Trinity*, ‘First, however, we must demonstrate, according to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, whether the faith be so.’

“Well now, isn’t that conveeeeeeenient,” Jeff said in his best Dana Carvey imitation of the [Church Lady](#) on *Saturday Night Live*. “Hey guys, if we can’t find the proof, we’ll just make it up as we go along, and tell the flock that’s how we, quote, interpret it, unquote. However, Augustine’s imaginary interpretation was challenged by another bishop, the Arian Maximinus of Madauros. In 427 or 428, Augustine and Maximinus got into a spirited debate in Augustine’s diocese of Hippo, where Maximinus, through his comprehensive mastery of biblical references, wiped the floor with the elderly Augustine:

If you say something reasonable, I shall have to agree. If you produce from the divine scriptures something that we all share, we shall have to listen. But those words which are not found in the scriptures are under no circumstance accepted by us, especially since the Lord warns us [Matthew 15:9], saying, ‘But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.’ . . .

. . . If you ask for my faith, I hold that faith which was not only stated, but was also ratified at Ariminum by the signatures of three hundred and thirty bishops. . . .

... We believe the scriptures, and we venerate the divine scriptures. We do not want a single particle of a letter to perish, for we fear the threat that is stated [Deuteronomy 4:2] in these divine scriptures, 'Woe to those who take away or add.' . . .

... We ought to accept all the things that are brought forth from the holy scriptures with full veneration. The divine scripture has not come as a source of our instruction so that we might correct it. . . .

... The truth is not obtained by argumentation, but is proved by certain testimonies. For this reason you ought to produce testimonies that the Holy Spirit is God . . .

"Additionally, given that the Church has historically had a problem with logic, Thomas Aquinas decided to throw in the towel altogether, as he concluded that the doctrine could only be proven through faith. As Tommy said in his masterpiece of theological [fertilizer](#), *Summa Theologica*, 'It is impossible to attain to the knowledge of the Trinity by natural reason. . . . Whoever, then, tries to prove the Trinity of persons by natural reason, derogates from faith in two ways.' Don't question what we tell you, just believe everything we say. Sit, stay, heel. Good boy, here's a communion wafer. Please open your hymnals to page thirteen and sing along with me: 'Holy, holy, holy; deceitful and dodgy! God in three persons, blessed trickery.'"

"Your humor is not appreciated," Mr. Hand growled.

"It's not? Okay, well perhaps some more proof. The Unitarians and the Mormons reject the doctrine of the Trinity, as they acknowledge—accurately, for once—that this doctrine is not original to Christianity. What ultimately became orthodox Christian doctrine, but only after the divinity of Jesus was officially declared following the Ecumenical Councils centuries after his death, was reflected by changes in the New Testament texts."

"What are you talking about?" Linda asked tersely.

"I'm talking about what Professor Ehrman documented thoroughly in *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, that the trinitarians started changing the texts to make the writings reflect what they wanted them to say, as he wrote:

Proto-orthodox scribes of the second and third centuries occasionally modified their texts of Scripture in order to make them coincide more closely with the christological views embraced by the party that would seal its victory at Nicaea and Chalcedon. . . .

... The proto-orthodox Christology, then, emerged as a direct response to these alternative perspectives and was distinguished by the paradoxes of its pedigree: Jesus Christ was both God and man, one indivisible being, eternal yet born of the virgin Mary, an immortal who died for the sins of the world.

"What passages were changed?" asked Mr. Hand.

"One of the alternative perspectives about Jesus floating around in the early years was held by a group known as the Adoptionists. Through his exemplary righteousness, Jesus came to be adopted as the Son of God at his baptism, or as others thought at the resurrection; hence the adoptionist name of the sect. This group felt that Jesus was fully human, and they, like the Ebionites, rejected the silly idea of a virgin birth. The proto-orthodox camp was appalled by the blatant heresy of other sects claiming that Jesus was anything short of completely divine. In response, orthodox scribes made some changes to the wording of certain passages and modified them in such a way that they could not be misinterpreted and used by other sects in support of opposing beliefs. In a way, this is where the fundamentalist belief in literal interpretations came from, as the proto-orthodox believers insisted that the scriptures could not be interpreted in a different way—other than how they wrote them, of course.

"For example, given the proto-orthodox belief in the virgin birth, scribes modified passages like Luke 2:42 and 48 which referred to the *parents* of Jesus in the original text. By changing the wording to make it less open to interpretation, this passage was changed from Joseph being one of the parents to stating, 'Joseph and his mother.' Or, as it is listed in our King James Version, the plural, *they*, was used in place of parents."

"How do scholars know these passages have been changed?" Mr. Hand inquired.

"By comparing the various manuscripts that have survived against each other, looking at the approximate dates of when each was written, and how the changes were then perpetuated in later as compared to the earlier versions. In this way, the original Gospels were corrupted by the early proto-orthodox scribes. For example, the passage from Matthew 28:19 sounds suspiciously like an addition that

came hundreds of years after Matthew was written, only after the Trinity doctrine became officially enshrined at Nicaea: ‘Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.’ Schweitzer gave his insights on this verse, as well: ‘The command to baptize in Matt. 28:19 is questionable . . . it implies the doctrine of the Trinity and, consequently, the metaphysical Divine Sonship of Jesus. . . . It is inconsistent with the earliest traditions regarding the practice of baptism in the Christian community, for in the earliest times, as we learn from the Acts and from Paul, it was the custom to baptize, not in the name of the Trinity, but in the name of Jesus.’”

“Even Isaac Newton undertook his own studies into falsified Trinity references that had crept their way into established doctrine, rather than just accepting these myths that have perpetuated through the ages and have become accepted as time-honored truths.”

“What are you talking about? Newton was a scientist, not a theologian,” Mr. Hand scoffed.

“Indeed, he was a scientist, but he was also keenly interested in the Bible and scriptural study. He was also most definitely *very* anti-trinitarian, but that fact was never revealed until well after his death, as it was against the law during his day to make blasphemous statements, and the very act of denying the Trinity was punishable by death. So, naturally, he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. As a result of this hostile situation to rational and open criticism, his in-depth biblical analysis, *An Historical Account of Two Notable Corruptions of Scripture*, wasn’t published until almost thirty years after his death. For this book, he thoroughly researched two specific passages, 1 John 5:7 and 1 Timothy 3:16, back to their original Greek texts. Newton found that subtle changes in favor of trinitarian thinking had altered the original meanings and changed the context of these passages in the Latin versions.

“In the King James Version of 1 John 5:7, the phrase, ‘in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one,’ is referred to by scholars as the Comma Johanneum. This bit never existed in the original Greek texts, but it was added to Latin versions of the Bible, which became included in later European translations. Current revised translations leave this portion out altogether or footnote it with a description highlighting its late addition.

“Similarly, a word in the passage from 1 Timothy 3:16 which declared ‘God was manifest in the flesh,’ was modified by trinitarian scribes from its original meaning. Initially, it read *he* was manifest in the flesh, but it was later rewritten as God to give Jesus an overtly divine status. And, just like the Comma Johanneum, some current revised versions switch it back again to the original wording.

“In another book by Professor Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, he encapsulated the shenanigans of these subtle changes and insertions:

In sum, a number of passages in our surviving manuscripts appear to embody the apologetic concerns of the early Christians, especially as these relate to the founder of their faith, Jesus himself. Just as with theological conflicts in the early church, the question of the role of women, and the controversies with Jews, so too with the disputes raging between Christians and their cultured despisers among the pagans: all of these controversies came to affect the texts that were eventually to become part of the book that we now call the New Testament, as this book—or rather set of books—was copied by nonprofessional scribes in the second and third centuries, and occasionally came to be altered in light of the contexts of their day.

Still not convinced, Mr. Hand asked, “So, what does any of this prove?”

“It amply demonstrates that later scribes very deliberately ‘trinitized’ their copies of the Bible in support of this imaginary claim for the divinity of Jesus, particularly in the Vulgate. It also proves that the fundamentalist Christian belief in the inerrancy of the Bible is quite clearly wrong, as the Roman Catholic texts—which influenced the King James Version—do not match the Greek texts due to these fictional additions. These modified passages are proof that the biblical text, as it appears today, are *not* the original writings that fundamentalists pledge their literal and unthinking loyalty towards.”

“Speaking of differences in the wording between the Greek and Latin Bibles, there is one other change that caused a major rift between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches for the past one thousand years—the addition to the Nicene Creed of the seemingly innocent Latin phrase ‘and the son,’ known as the Filioque Clause. The Nicene Creed, which is the fundamental statement of the Christian belief in the Trinity, precisely affirms the officially declared nature of Jesus in combination with God and the Holy Ghost, leaving no room for alternative interpretations.

“The Latin Church’s simple act of inserting the Filioque Clause to the end of a passage in the Nicene Creed—which was itself revised after further doctrinal haggling at the Council of Constantinople in 381—

helped contribute to the Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. As demonstrated by the ongoing Arian dissent and multiple councils, most Greek bishops thought that the beliefs established by the Nicene Creed were *unorthodox*, but ironically, a few hundred years later, the bishops of the Orthodox Church believed so devoutly in the Nicene formulation and its statement about the nature of God, that adding the Filioque Clause was equivalent to heresy.

“By 1054, the Nicene Creed was so firmly embedded in the Orthodox mind, that when the Latin version was tampered with, the Greek Church went absolutely ballistic. Observe the profound, Earth-shaking consequences caused by the addition of this clause to the creed: ‘We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; . . . And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father—’ this next bit is very disturbing, so prepare yourself—‘*and from the son* together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.’ Is everyone okay, do I need to call the school nurse? All the ensuing hysteria and the centuries of inter-Church doctrinal nitpicking came from this one tiny insertion over the fact that the Holy Spirit originates from the father *and* Jesus, not just God. And yet, the universe hasn’t come to a crashing halt.

“There are two other major obstacles preventing the two Churches from reconciling their differences. One is the Vatican claim of papal infallibility, which the Catholics cleverly conferred upon themselves. This was a rather generous bequest to themselves, if not a downright modest one. The second issue is the Vatican claim—also self-appointed—to primacy over all other dioceses, which they claim through their descent from Peter as the fictional first bishop of Rome.”

“What? Wait a second, are you implying that Peter wasn’t the first pope?” Mr. Hand questioned.

“Not by a hundred years or more, and the Vatican knows Peter wasn’t the first pope; they just don’t advertise it to their factually challenged and historically oblivious followers. Nevertheless, they rest their entire hollow claims of papal authority on the flawed argument that Peter was the first bishop of Rome. Professor Ehrman, in *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene*, stated:

We have two writings from Christians who actually resided in Rome. Both attest to a situation in which the Roman church was not under the leadership of a single individual, the bishop. . . .

. . . It was only with the passage of time that the Christian churches developed the hierarchical structures that came to characterize their organization by the end of the second century. . . .

Eventually these churches would band together to make common cause. And when they did so, they appointed leaders who would be in charge of all the communities found throughout the city. But this was a development that did not transpire until the middle of the second century. Peter, in short, could not have been the first bishop of the church of Rome, because the Roman church did not have *anyone* as its bishop until about a hundred years after Peter’s death.

“Professor Vermes takes it one step further by deconstructing the *only* passage in the *entire* New Testament that the Vatican rests their whole illegitimate claim upon, Matthew 16:18: ‘And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ The professor stated:

The promise made to Simon, known as Peter, is the only passage in the Gospels where Jesus speaks of establishing a church. . . . The Greek term *ekklesia* (church) first appears in the Gospels at Matthew 16:18 and recurs only on one more occasion, in Matthew 18:17. . . .

. . . The context in which this saying, exclusive to Matthew, appears is Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi concerning Jesus’ messianic status. The episode of Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ is contained in all three Synoptic Gospels, but his appointment to be the rock does not figure in either Mark or Luke. Their silence on something as important as Peter’s nomination as head of the *ekklesia* strongly intimates that Matthew 16:17-19 must be a secondary accretion. The lack of any mention of the church in the other Gospels, including John, also points in the same direction. In short, the words about Peter’s promotion should be credited not to Jesus, but to Matthew or his editor in AD 80 or later. . . .

. . . The word *ekklesia* (church) is absent from Mark, Luke and even from John. . . . On the basis of the verbal statistics – no mention of *ekklesia* in three out of the four Gospels and a

mention in only two passages in Matthew – we may safely conclude that Jesus himself left no teaching about a church. . . . In brief, there is no evidence to support the idea that the foundation of the church was among the major concerns of Jesus.

“Further, textual criticism of verses seventeen to nineteen also gave a clue with which to doubt the legitimacy of this passage. The verses immediately before and after are discussing who people, the disciples included, think Jesus is, and this passage interrupts the flow of that dialogue. The fact that the immediately preceding and succeeding passages are discussing the messianic secret, demonstrates, yet again, how biblical scribes insulted the intelligence of believers who, they thought, would never be smart enough to challenge their clumsy attempts to insert this obvious forgery. This example follows exactly the same pattern I noted earlier, when I cited Professor Ehrman pointing out the forged insertion into the middle of a dialogue in 1 Corinthians 14.

“Professor MacCulloch, a colleague of the late Vermes at Oxford University, went even further, highlighting the seemingly odd choice to elevate Peter based upon this single verse. Especially, since it was the apostle Paul who pushed for an evangelizing mission to the Gentiles, in contrast to Peter’s entirely Jewish focus, noted in their confrontation at Antioch as recounted in Galatians 2. In the second episode, *Catholicism: The Unpredictable Rise of Rome*, of *A History of Christianity* Professor MacCulloch pointed out:

The crucial steps towards centralized power were taken thirty years after Constantine’s death. The decision to promote Peter, over Paul, was exploited to the full. That laid foundations for the later papacy. It was during the time of Pope Damasus I, that the bishop of Rome was established as bishop in unbroken succession from St. Peter. Well, I’ll stick my neck out and say that I don’t believe that Peter was bishop in Rome. You’d be hard put to find anyone before the time of Pope Damasus who made that claim. The list of the bishops of Rome up to about 180 is just that, a list, linking Damasus back to the disciple who knew Jesus; Peter. You might say that Paul was now surplus to requirements. As successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome became the Holy Father, Pope, of all Christians in the West. Now, Damasus set out to give Christianity the glory which an imperial religion demanded. He brought the good news, not to the poor and the downtrodden to whom Jesus had preached, but to the Roman nobility.

“Another title associated with the pope is pontifex. The pontifex had been the chief priest of the college of priests in the days of the Roman Republic. After Augustus consolidated power and created the empire, the role of pontifex and its title became vested in the emperor. The Christian emperor Gratian gave up this title at the urging of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, when it was then adopted after 366 by Damasus and his successors, becoming the *Twitter* handle for the popes starting in 2012.”

“That is interesting,” Mr. Hand observed, “I never realized there was only one reference to founding a church in the New Testament, or that the Vatican’s claim, through Peter, was so shaky.”

“Indeed, it is a shaky claim, because the belief that the bishop of Rome has ultimate authority was built on sandy foundations, not a rock. And between these two blatant facts—definitive proof that there was no organized Church hierarchy until long after Peter had died, and that the single verse the Vatican uses to grant primacy to themselves is not even authentic—the Vatican finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place in justifying their traditional nonsense. In short, the emperor has no clothes, he is a pretender to the throne, and all their infallible proclamations are nothing more than the hot air of puffed-up theocrats. No matter what official Vatican doctrine likes to declare of itself, and despite the wishful thinking of its power-hungry despots eager to find historical grounds to validate their self-awarded claims to authority, their assertions of primacy are bogus, and they damn well know it.

“Further evidence that the Vatican claims are entirely illegitimate, ties back to the fact that the apocalyptically minded Jesus, and the early converts, expected the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God within their lifetimes. It would never have occurred to Jesus that there would be a long-term for which a Church would need to be founded. As Professor Ehrman wrote in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, ‘Jesus was a first-century apocalypticist, who never expected that there would be a twentieth century.’ Therefore, Matthew 16:18 does not reflect the needs of this small group of doomsday cultists; but it does mirror, rather conveniently, the requirements of an organized religion, as it was only in response to the delayed return of Jesus that the Church came about as an afterthought.

“It might also be interesting to wonder why the major Ecumenical Councils that debated the divine nature of Jesus, establishing what would become orthodox Christian doctrine, were all held in Greek and in

the eastern half of the empire. The councils were either poorly attended, or not at all, by the Latin-speaking bishops, as I mentioned that only five Latin bishops attended Nicaea. If Rome was so all-important, then why were they all held in the east? Palestinian-influenced Antioch and Hellenistic-influenced Alexandria had *always* been the main centers of Christianity, not Johnny—or should I say—Peter-come-lately Rome.

“Only after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, in 476, did the Roman Church start to emerge as the singularly dominant force in Western Europe. After the last Western Roman emperor was deposed, the Church’s widespread centralized bureaucracy remained as the sole, cohesive European-wide administrative force. By contrast, the Eastern Orthodox Church remained under the control of the Byzantine emperors for another thousand years. Half a millennium before the Great Schism, the Acacian Schism took place in which Pope Felix III and his successor, Gelasius I, were embroiled in a Mexican standoff with Anastasius, the Eastern Roman emperor, and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Acacius, for whom the schism was named. It was Pope Gelasius I, elected in 492 and free from imperial constraints, who asserted the primacy of Rome over all other bishoprics in a doctrinal superiority contest with the Orthodox Church. Again, it should be noted that the gulf separating the Catholic and Orthodox Churches was about more than just doctrine, as they are physically distinct regions with segregated geographical spheres of influence, and Latin- and Greek-speaking populations, respectively. The realities on the ground played just as much a role in this division, as the ego-driven quest for dominance. You would think men of God, called to a higher purpose, would be above the squabbles and petty machinations of power politics, but alas, no. Religion is *always* political; then and now.

“However, it was not until Pope Gregory of the Seven Deadly Sins, well into the late sixth century, that the medieval foundations of Western papal authority were established—half a millennium after Peter’s bones had turned to relics. People tend to project their modern notions of Vatican power back into early Christian history, giving the Roman Catholic Church more credit than they are due. This is an impression they are quite happy to foster and indulge with their own propaganda. Yet, in the early days, it seems that the Vatican was suffering from an inferiority complex as they demanded that their claim as Peter’s rightful heirs be taken seriously, and that the Greek half of the Church recognize their claims and show the appropriate respect that they demanded for themselves. Goodness, it’s a wonder that the pope doesn’t drive a red sports car to compensate.

“It was not until the sixth century that the emergence of a strong and independent Vatican, the one of papal authority founded by Pope Gregory the Great, appeared. Historian Charles Freeman noted in *Egypt, Greece and Rome*:

Gregory exploited his freedom from imperial control and doggedly set out on a new path which was to define the nature of western Christendom. The bishop of Rome was to be the presiding force in Christian Europe with his fellow but subordinate bishops strengthened as leaders of the Christian communities. The authority of the church rested jointly on the four Gospels and the four ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon) but ‘without the authority and consent of the apostolic see [Rome]’, insisted Gregory ‘none of the matters transacted [by a council] has any binding force.’ It was a sophisticated rationale for papal power which owed much to the theology of Augustine but rested ultimately on the direct succession Gregory claimed from the apostle Peter. The foundations had been laid of the medieval papacy. They were reinforced by the widening doctrinal split with the east, and a growing isolation from the traditional Greek-speaking centres of Christianity as the leading members of the western church (Augustine, as has been seen, is one example) were unable any longer to understand Greek. Later, in the seventh century, Rome’s position was further strengthened by the eclipse of two traditional rivals, the bishoprics of Alexandria and Antioch, by the Arab invasions so that one can justly talk of ‘the Roman see as the single isolated, religious centre of the barbarian west.’

“Gregory’s concept of absolute papal power had grown more embedded over the centuries, and by the sixteenth century, the Vatican’s demand for total obedience to their divine mandate was reaffirmed during the Counter-Reformation. After the Council of Trent, which was convened to respond to the growing threat of the little people daring to question Vatican authority during the Protestant Reformation, Pope Pius IV issued the Papal Bull *Benedictus Deus* in 1564 confirming all the decisions and decrees of the Council. Afterward, Pius IV summarized the doctrinal teachings in what became one of the four authoritative Catholic Creeds, known alternately as the Tridentine Creed, the Creed of Pius IV, or the Profession of

Catholic Faith. In this [creed](#) Catholics were now required to swear: ‘I also accept the Holy Scripture according to that sense which holy mother the Church hath held, and doth hold, and to whom it belongeth to judge the true sense and interpretations of the Scriptures. Neither will I ever take and interpret them otherwise than according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.’ There is the over-statement of the millennium, and one that completely sums up their institutional arrogance and sheer cluelessness.

“During the Protestant Reformation, when people were objecting to the Vatican’s absolute control and leaving by the thousands in disgust, the Catholic Church was presented with a golden opportunity to reform their authoritarian ways by becoming more open-minded and reasonable. What did they do instead? They cracked down even harder and reasserted their centuries-old mantra in their desperate paranoia of losing control: ‘It’s our way or the highway. You all better do as we say, and only as we say, or we will excommunicate you Godless heretics and leave you to burn in hell for eternity.’ Excommunication, the Vatican version of a temper tantrum, scaring the flock into conformity with threats of being spiritually outcast.

“This is hardly the behavior of a rational and mature institution, one secure in their divine right to lead. Their actions more closely resemble those of communist regimes that repress freedom of thought and any form of dissent. If the Vatican must officially decree exactly what their followers are allowed to think, that the parishioners must absolutely believe everything told to them, is Vatican authority really that legitimate in the first place? Perhaps, if these guys were allowed to have children, they might know a little something about child psychology. If that had been the case, maybe the Counter-Reformation would not have been so reactionary and counterproductive, because the stricter they got the more people rebelled and were driven straight into the arms of the Protestants.”

“In a way, I suppose that was a good thing,” Linda reflected self-righteously, “or else we Protestant evangelical Christians might still be living under the domination of the Vatican, forced to believe in their proclamations.”

“You mean as opposed to the mental subjugation of fundamentalism?” Jeff inquired, seeing as she completely missed the irony of her own comments. “However, that does lead me to the next point about the intellectual repression the Church inflicted on the people under their control throughout most of its history. Charles Freeman went into great detail about the Vatican’s efforts to suppress reason and philosophy in *The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason*—don’t you just love that title? Freeman examined this fondness and tendency for thought control in Christian history by highlighting some of Paul’s very telling comments:

“The more they [non-Christians] called themselves philosophers,” he tells the Romans (1:21-22), “the more stupid they grew . . . they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened.” In his first letter to the Corinthians (1:25) he writes, “The wisdom of the world is foolishness to God.” There is something of the mystic in Paul’s disregard of logic. . . . This disregard had unfortunate consequences. As Paul’s writings came to be seen as authoritative, it became a mark of the committed Christian to be able to reject rational thought, and even the evidence of empirical experience. Christians would often pride themselves on their lack of education, associating independent philosophical thinking with the sin of pride.

“In keeping with Paul’s sentiments, the Church actively repressed independent thought as they tried hard to bury the traditions of Greek philosophy and reasoning in an attempt to solidify their control for the hearts, minds, and souls of the very people who might otherwise impudently question their decidedly illogical doctrines. Yale history professor, Ramsay MacMullen, quoted Pope Gregory the Great to beautifully sum up this repressive mentality of the early Church in his book, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*. Professor MacMullen wrote, ‘A voluminous writer, Gregory was nevertheless an enemy to much education, of which he often expressed his distrust: “The wise should be advised to cease from their knowledge,” to be “wise in ignorance, wisely untaught.”’ I think Greg must have been echoing Saint John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople, who said over a hundred years earlier, ‘Restrain our own reasoning, and empty our mind of secular learning, in order to provide a mind swept clear for the reception of divine words.’”

“What about the fact that the Church founded numerous universities?” Mr. Hand asked, somewhat confused by this apparent contradictory situation.

“Yes, they did, and they also controlled what was not allowed to be taught. The core curriculum was heavily based on theology and was mainly a training ground for the religious indoctrination of the clergy.

The different clerical orders, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, fought for intellectual control over these institutions, and by default, for the minds of the students who would graduate and go on to careers in those orders. I am sure we students are all familiar with the word scholastic, as in Scholastic Aptitude Test, as this word is related to scholasticism which refers to the method of teaching at these medieval Catholic universities. This teaching style was heavily based around inferring truth from biblical passages using logic and deductive reasoning. Surprisingly, even hundreds of years after the Reformation, it was only in the nineteenth century that some of these great and ancient universities—such as Oxford, the oldest English-speaking university—began to throw off the shackles of religious influence, allowing free and unfettered thinking.”

“You just contradicted yourself. First, you said the Church practiced intellectual repression, then you said they taught logic and reasoning at their universities,” Mr. Hand continued the challenge.

“Universities, in the form we know them today, were not established until after 1000 CE. Prior to that, reason was actively suppressed in the formative years of the Church’s rise to power in the last half of the first millennium. It was not until the thirteenth century when the Catholic scholar, Thomas Aquinas, brought these ideals back into mainstream fashion by using them as a basis to rationalize some of the Church’s more outlandish beliefs. Tommy uses his highly developed skills for babbling on . . . and on and on . . . to construct circular arguments that go into a very tedious philosophical reasoning of why we can’t use reason—contradictory, I know—to justify things like the Trinity doctrine; a doctrine, which, as I quoted earlier, just has to be accepted on faith.

“Conversely, Islamic scholars were making great advances in science and medicine when the Vatican still insisted the sun revolved around the Earth and tortured anyone who dared to contradict them. Muslim scholars saved much of our own Western history, ancient literature, and great works of Greek philosophy, while the Catholic Church was busy burning it for us.”

“Are you going to start praising the Muslims again, as you did in civics class?” Linda moaned.

“This may be painful for you to hear, but the Muslims had, initially, a far better track record for intellectual and religious tolerance than their Christian brothers had in Europe. The Islamic Golden Age, which lasted from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, saw many advances in astronomy and mathematics; algebra being one of those innovations which is the bane of high school students everywhere. Commenting on the contrasting attitudes to intellectual progress between Christian Europe and the Islamic East, was the tenth-century Arab historian and scholar, al-Mas’ūdī, as Professor Frankopan noted:

This disdain for science and scholarship baffled Muslim commentators, who had great respect for Ptolemy and Euclid, for Homer and Aristotle. Some had little doubt what was to blame. Once, wrote the historian al-Mas’ūdī, the ancient Greeks and the Romans had allowed the sciences to flourish; then they adopted Christianity. When they did so, they ‘effaced the signs of [learning], eliminated its traces and destroyed its paths’. Science was defeated by faith. It is almost the precise opposite of the world as we see it today: the fundamentalists were not the Muslims, but the Christians; those whose minds were open, curious and generous were based in the east – and certainly not in Europe.

“Previously, I mentioned Professor MacCulloch and his comments on the establishment of the Church of the East, and their settling in Baghdad. In the same episode, he went on to explain how all this Western knowledge came to be preserved by Muslims for its eventual return to Europe:

It’s naturally proud of its ancient lineage, but in fact, it has a much bigger significance in the history of Christianity. That’s because these Eastern Christians persuaded their Muslim rulers that they had unique skills to offer, skills gained during the time they spent arguing about the nature of Christ. They turned Greek theology, literature, and philosophy into their native Syriac to argue the case. They became the think tank of the Middle East. So, when the new Muslim empire wanted to translate Greek science and philosophy into Arabic, it was to . . . these Christians that it naturally turned. We in the West owe the Church of the East a huge debt. Much of what we know about Greek learning, from medicine, to astronomy, and even the system of Arabic numerals in use today, all come to us courtesy of those Christian translators.

“This culture of scientific inquiry also impacted Western life in another way that is lost on most people today. Professor MacCulloch, this time in the second episode of his series dealing with the rise of Catholicism, noted:

There was at least one positive and hugely important outcome of the Crusades, a legacy that's still with us now. I wouldn't be a professor without it, so it must be good. Thanks to the Crusades, Islam gave us universities, and my employer, Oxford University, was one of the first. Academic robes, professorial chairs, lectures, the qualification of a degree itself are not Western ideas; they're all copied in remarkable detail from medieval Islamic schools of higher education, and all to cope with a flow of new information pouring in from the Middle East.

"This is not to say, however, that if Europe had come under Islamic rule they wouldn't have been dragged into the same period of decline and intellectual stagnation which befell the Islamic world; a situation from which it has yet to recover. In the eleventh century, al-Ghazali, a prominent Persian scholar, published *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in which he criticized the Greek philosophy that was being used by other Islamic scholars, denouncing those such as Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna. Claiming faith should take priority over philosophy in metaphysical matters, al-Ghazali set the stage for the slow, but steady, diminishment of all the sciences in Islamic society, marking the ascendancy of theologically infused curriculums as in European schools. Centuries after the Enlightenment, Islamic countries still lag behind those Western societies that were the beneficiaries of the scientific revolution, a result of the intellectual blossoming which occurred once the shackles of theocratic repression were removed. Case in point, up to 2018 a grand total of three Muslims have received Nobel prizes for work in the sciences.

"If Charles Martel, Charlemagne's granddad, hadn't stopped the Muslim advance into Europe at the Battle of Tours in 732 CE then Western history—and Christianity's place within it, including the Vatican's absolute power—would have been drastically altered."

"I shudder to think what would have happened," Linda trembled. "We, and all our ancestors since, would have been forced to be Muslim."

"Not necessarily. Remember, I said they were known for being very tolerant of other religions, especially to Jews and Christians who were kindred believers of the one God, or People of the Book. After the defeat at Tours in modern-day France, the Moors, as the Muslims were called in Europe, were confined to Spain, where a golden age of culture, science, and mathematics thrived. Just as members of the Church of the East were respected translators in Baghdad, Jews in Muslim Spain and North Africa could prosper; like Maimonides, whom I mentioned earlier in relation to biblical allegorism who rose to be the court physician to Saladin in Egypt. The Moorish rulers provided safe haven and tolerance for Sephardic Jews, which stands in stark contrast to the anti-Semitism and intellectual repression inflicted by the Christians in the rest of Europe.

"Perhaps you've heard of the Alhambra, the red fortress at Granada, a brilliant example of the Moorish architectural legacy. After Ferdinand and Isabella—those delightfully torturous Catholic zealots who brought us the Spanish Inquisition—succeeded in reconquering Spain from the Moors in 1492, they issued the Alhambra Decree, also known as the Edict of Expulsion. This decree from the massively intolerant Catholic monarchs forced the Spanish Jews to convert, which some did under duress, or leave, which many chose to do. Many of these Sephardic Jews sought refuge within the Ottoman Empire, where they again found tolerance in a Muslim society—though, I am sure there are a few examples of not-so-nice treatment, too. However, this little footnote to history speaks volumes as to how the modern State of Israel repays this kindness in their treatment of the Palestinians; but, I digress.

"A few years later in 1499, sadly and in keeping with the Vatican tradition of intellectual repression under the *enlightened* guidance of the Catholics in Spain, Archbishop Cisneros of Toledo ordered the destruction of the collected wisdom of the Moors. Other than the medical texts, Cisneros burned all the Arabic manuscripts at Granada to ensure every Spanish Catholic, from the king on down, stayed true to form: ignorant, backward, and intolerant. As a reward for his tyrannical dedication to truth, justice, and the Vatican way, Cisneros was later made a Cardinal and a Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition. Yes, the Catholics certainly helped to preserve the light of Western civilization after the fall of the Roman Empire . . . ahem, yep."

"So, you think we would have been better off without the turn of events at Tours?" Linda asked in astonishment.

"I think it is a very definite possibility. Technologically, how much further advanced would our society be if the Enlightenment and Age of Reason had dawned centuries earlier? Although, there likely would not have been the need for such an intellectual reawakening in the first place if Europe existed in an atmosphere

of cooperation that drew upon the great works of Islamic science, free from the intellectual repression and authoritarian control of the Vatican.

“If the Vatican had been brought back under the authority of an external ruler from the Moorish Empire, as the Orthodox Church had been in the Eastern Roman Empire, would the Protestant Reformation along with all the denominations that spawned in its wake, have even happened? Not only would European Christian history have changed dramatically, but the repercussions of Western colonial ambitions on world history—if they even unfolded in the same way—would also be radically different.”

“How would it have been different?” the perplexed history teacher asked.

“It would be vastly different because European imperialists took their Christian beliefs with them to their new colonies. For instance, Isabella sent Christopher Columbus stumbling haphazardly into the New World, bringing along Catholicism, Pizarro, Cortés, intolerance, and genocide to Central and South American civilizations. Diego de Landa, a Franciscan monk hell-bent on converting the Mayan people in Mexico, shamefully burned the Maya Codices in 1562, destroying centuries of precious, irreplaceable history and culture in his misplaced zeal. Magellan showed up in the Philippines in 1521, ushering in an era of disgraceful Spanish domination. It really does make one wonder what these countries would be like today if not for the Spanish, the cruel and intolerant religious influences they brought with them, and the legacy of impoverished, third world countries they left in their wake. Well, it is all water under the bridge I guess, as there is no point in dwelling on what could have been.”

“It seems unfair of you to blame all the troubles of the third world on the Vatican, Jeff,” Linda stated.

“It is not *all* their fault, but they didn’t help matters. And history clearly demonstrates that countries that had been, or still are, under the thumb of Vatican authority suffer from higher levels of poverty, illiteracy, and birth rates than non-Catholic countries. Look at the situation in both Quebec and Ireland, before those societies underwent secular shifts in the second half of the twentieth century and then after, when their respective governments severely restricted the influence of the Church in their domestic politics. A particularly revealing aspect of the Vatican’s control over civilian governments was demonstrated by the *remarkably* improved economic and social conditions in these two places afterward. What was particularly remarkable in Ireland, was the dramatic shift in their historically staunch conservative Catholic society towards a much more liberal and open-minded attitude. Note the public referendums in which the people overwhelmingly voted to legalize [same-sex marriage](#) in 2015, and abolish obsolete [blasphemy laws](#) and overturn the [abortion ban](#) in 2018.

“One of the main reasons the Protestants in the six counties of Northern Ireland opted to stay under British dominion in 1921 and didn’t want to be ruled from the republic based in Dublin, was precisely because the Catholic Church had far too much power over everyday affairs in the south, and they feared what this level of interference would mean. Though, obviously, the historical, social, political, economic, and religious repercussions of this partitioning are more complex than issues just related to Vatican domination. However, the Protestants may have been more willing to join a united Ireland, and the decades of terrorism in Northern Ireland might have been avoided if the Church hadn’t had such an iron grip on the public institutions of the pre-secularized Irish people. The fears of the Northern Protestants were ultimately proven correct when it was revealed in the 2009 Murphy [Report](#) that the Catholic Church used its influence with the government in the Republic of Ireland to help cover up decades of rampant sexual abuse.”

“What does all this history even matter? It doesn’t change what I believe and hold dear to my heart,” Linda stated bluntly and forcing Jeff to end his history lesson.

Stunned, Jeff formed his thoughts for a moment before proceeding. “Historical awareness matters because if we don’t know the past, how can we understand how we got to the present? It matters because the foundation of your beliefs is based on propaganda, legends, and in some cases, outright lies. The more I study and research, the more convinced I am—and most New Testament scholars—that Christians have completely screwed up Christianity by distorting, or just plain ignoring, the original message of Jesus. The Jesus you know, or the one you think you know, has been sanitized and rebranded for later audiences after his predictions for the Kingdom ended in utter failure. This corrupted version of Christianity has totally altered the course of Western history for the past two millennia. So yes, I would say the historical impact Judeo-Christian beliefs have had, and continues to have, matters quite a lot.”

“Why do you even care what other people believe in, especially if their faith makes them happy, helps them to be better people, or gives them strength?” Linda pressed on.

“I probably shouldn’t care, but I do. I care, because I refuse to enable a mentality that thinks it is acceptable to overlook reality in place of that faith; a faith that demands the willing participation of non-

believers through our respectful silence. Society should not be expected to just smile and nod at those who think blind faith is a virtue. Society should not tolerate such an attitude by refusing to challenge such blatant ignorance out of some misplaced notion that it is impolite to question or offend a belief. Doing so only adds to the problems of this world, and I choose to be part of the solution.

“As to whether it makes believers happy or gives them strength is not the point. If people live their lives based on beliefs that are a pack of lies, however moral and charitable those lives may be, does that still make it acceptable? Shouldn’t people strive to be good out of basic human compassion, and not by having imaginary relationships with a nonexistent deity based on those lies in order to feel good about themselves?”

“Are you trying to say that billions of people, over all these centuries, have been wrong?” Mr. Hand asked, with a very ominous edge to his tone.

“Pretty scary, isn’t it? But it does make you wonder about all the time and energy over the generations that have gone into these artificially created religious ideas. In *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris voiced exactly the same thought when he wrote, ‘Think of all the good things human beings will not do in this world tomorrow because they believe that their most pressing task is to build another church or mosque, or to enforce some ancient dietary practice, or to print volumes upon volumes of exegesis on the disordered thinking of ignorant men. How many hours of human labor will be devoured, today, by an imaginary God?’

“All that wasted effort, all the people who have devoted their whole lives to this imaginary nonsense, century after century. Just think of what they could have accomplished for humanity if they’d taken all that collective energy and focused it on something real and productive, instead of secluded in prayer. You know the saying: it’s the journey, not the destination. We should all enjoy the ride while we’re stuck on this rock, because it’s the only turn we are going to get, and we shouldn’t waste our lives in the false hope of delayed gratification in the afterlife.”

“I find your opinions offensive, Jeff,” Linda asserted forcefully.

“What can I say? Sometimes the truth hurts, and people will do anything to avoid unpleasant truths. But that doesn’t make the facts any less true just because certain people refuse to acknowledge them. If that is offensive, then so be it.”

“It is still *my* faith and it is important to me, so why shouldn’t I believe in the tenets of my religion?” Linda asked frankly.

“If it is so important to you, then why don’t you take the time to understand your beliefs thoroughly? Beyond a superficial reading of a handful of Bible passages and a few ceremonial practices, the vast majority of you know *absolutely nothing* about the history of your faith and beliefs. When was the last time any of you have ever seriously studied the Bible? And I don’t mean sitting around in a church basement regurgitating passages and projecting your own modern contexts into it. I mean reading books by real scholars that would provide a better perspective about your beliefs, rather than being unwilling to learn or accept anything new, or God forbid, different. Perhaps it is time to open your minds to new ideas and concepts that might actually inform your faith. A faith that you claim is so preciously fundamental to your everyday lives, that studying these books would help you to fully understand your beliefs. I take it from your silence that the answer is never.”

“Funny guy, aren’t you? I don’t need to examine my beliefs, I know what they are,” Linda reasserted.

“I’m not so sure that you do.”

“I know what my Bible tells me,” Linda defended weakly.

“You clearly don’t, as you have repeatedly demonstrated today. However, you can take comfort from the fact that you aren’t alone, as the 2019 survey “What Americans Know About Religion” by the *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* revealed. The [results](#) showed atheists, agnostics, and Jews got over half of the questions right, outperforming Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons who got less than half the answers correct. While evangelicals scored the highest on questions about Christianity, they still managed to get one-third of them wrong.

“Then again, the general public being more informed is lethal to the survival of organized religion, as the arch-nemesis of religion is knowledge. And if you try to deny it, I can show you in Genesis 2 where it is written that the tree of knowledge was forbidden. Yeah, yeah, I know . . . I can see you all about to protest that it was the knowledge of good and evil; whatever. Knowledge leads to understanding, and understanding leads to an awareness of reality and a questioning of beliefs. Sadly for religion, questioning is the beginning of the end of ignorance as the mind begins to free itself from the bondage of faith, and believers take the first tentative step in the recovery process towards enlightenment.”

“How could you even possibly understand what we Christians feel and experience in our love of Jesus? You smug atheists hate God and criticize that which you know nothing about,” Mr. Hand stated forcefully, throwing down the gauntlet.

“Really, your rebuttal is that I just don’t understand; that is the best argument you can come up with? Look, I understand your perspective, I really do. I can honestly say that I have run the entire continuum of belief from a devout, inflexible believer, to moderate Christian, to deist, then agnostic, and finally to atheist. I know *exactly* how hard it can be to let go of such deeply ingrained beliefs a little at a time, with the superstitious lingering fear of divine retribution keeping a tight grip, hedging my bets just in case I was wrong. Don’t just assume that I got to this point quickly or easily. This journey involved a long, hard, deep reflection, a lot of reading, self-study, education, and a tremendous amount of mental anxiety to finally make the decision to give up my faith.

“I remember the spiritual feelings I experienced in my devout days, so I know exactly how you think and what your arguments are. I also recall how easily and willingly I let myself believe the same things without question, and I have only myself to blame for so easily surrendering my intellect. I let it happen and I never questioned anything, but I also didn’t have the evidence with which to fight back and challenge what I was being taught, either. So, I fully understand how deeply held your religious convictions are and where your spiritual arguments are coming from. However, those convictions were taught to you and you can unlearn them, as well.

“In the case of evangelicals, convictions like the Bible being free of errors and contradictions is something that evidence and an open mind will help you to overcome. There are so many examples of contradictions to choose from that we would be here all year going over them. I will, for the sake of brevity, limit myself to only two contradictions, ones that surround the conversion of Paul. Linda, would you please read Galatians 1:15-20 so that you don’t think I am making it up and you can see it for yourself.”

Linda rifled through the pages until she found the appropriate passage. She began;

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother. Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.

“Okay, now pick up again at Acts 9:25-28, after the tale of Paul’s blinding conversion and baptism, and please tell us what immediately happened next?” Jeff requested, as Linda flipped from Galatians to Acts.

Linda read once again:

Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket. And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

“Okay, what about it, where was the contradiction?” Linda inquired.

“Did you miss it? Overlooked the obvious, did you? Read the words, but didn’t digest the meaning? Fine, I will spell it out for you. In Paul’s own words in Galatians—which I would think would be the more accurate of the two accounts—he said it took him three years to get to Jerusalem to meet the disciples. Comparatively, the description of the events in Acts, written by the author of Luke around twenty years after Paul’s death, said that Paul went immediately to Jerusalem. Now, they can’t both be right and obviously one has to be wrong, but that violates a basic premise of your fundamentalist inerrant doctrine. That’s quite the dilemma you’re in, having to decide which one is wrong. Is the fabric of your universe unraveling in the presence of two opposing and contradictory positions? ‘Neither can live while the other survives.’”

“Huh, what do you mean by that?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. It’s something you wouldn’t understand, since the books that reference comes from were banned here by overzealous morons who feared it would lead their precious children into

witchcraft. But, getting back on topic, you must now be in a precarious state where—gasp!—you’ve been made aware that the Bible contradicts itself and that it can’t be inerrant after all.”

“I can’t explain how they don’t contradict each other, but I am sure my minister can explain how and why they don’t.”

“Yes, I’m sure he can. Rather than just logically and easily admitting that the Bible isn’t perfect, I am sure your minister can engage in some rambling, excremental justification of how these two passages don’t contradict each other. That God, in his all-knowing, all-seeing power, would have prevented any and all mistakes from ever creeping into later copies or translations by guiding the hands of the scribes with the Holy Spirit. Is that about right?”

“Yup, that’s it exactly,” Linda proclaimed vacuously in all profound seriousness. “Obviously, what has come down to us is the correct version, as God guided and inspired his messengers to provide the true word.”

“Then why didn’t God just guide and inspire the original authors with the correct words in the first place? Don’t you see the unnecessary troubles these idiotic beliefs cause, beliefs that force convoluted excuses and irrational rationalizations to be thought up in order to explain all the inconsistencies that arise due to this doctrinal inerrancy nonsense?”

As Linda couldn’t realistically answer the question, she just chose to ignore it and changed the subject. “I believe you mentioned two examples of contradictions.”

“I’m always happy to demonstrate yet another blatant contradiction. While you have your precious Bible open to this chapter, please do us all the pleasure of reciting the dramatic account of Paul’s first encounter with the divine converter in Acts 9:7.”

“‘And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.’ Okay, where next?” Linda challenged.

“Now, flip forward a few pages to Acts 22:9.”

“‘And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.’ Yeah, so what?” Linda challenged again.

“You once again failed to absorb the words you so easily skimmed over without ever actually making an effort to understand them; that figures. I will explain it to you, yet again, using simple words so you can follow along. The same author, in two places of his own book, said in the first instance that Paul’s companions heard, but couldn’t see the voice which spoke to Paul. In the second passage, they saw but didn’t hear. Well, which one was it? Did they see and not hear, or hear and not see? I’m waiting, all atwitter in anticipation, for you to inform those of us gathered here today that there is no mistake between these two contradictory accounts.”

“Of course there was no mistake, the Bible is infallible, so how could it be an error?” she stated once again in all seriousness. “There must be a reasonable explanation,” she finished with an irritating know-it-all smirk of absolute divine assurance.

“That is some really powerful self-delusion you’ve got going on.”

“It is *not* deluded to believe in God, his son, and our heavenly salvation. I would pray for you if I thought it would make any difference, but there is no helping the likes of someone as wayward and lost as you.”

“Nor is there any hope in helping someone like you to see the truth,” Jeff countered.

“Whatever,” Linda retorted. “The Bible is the one and only truth. Who are you to say it’s false? Who died and made you an expert on all this anyway?”

“When did I ever hold myself up as a beacon of expertise? Though, I am capable of reading the research conducted by the experts. And in any case, today I have only given you the executive summary versions. If I may quote Sir Isaac Newton, ‘If I have been able to see further than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.’ All the facts I have been citing have been thoroughly researched by scholars much smarter and more informed than I am. I do not pretend to be a philosopher or a master of rhetoric, and surely others can articulate these concepts more eloquently than I have done. But at least I try to understand what scholars have discovered and to educate myself so as not to remain a prisoner of tradition.

“If you want to see the reams of evidence for yourself, do a search on any of what I have mentioned and have at it. There are vast amounts of authoritative, expert scholarly works for you to devour, and they can explain it in much more detail than I could possibly hope to convey. So, who are you to say the Bible is true? Are you one of these biblical scholars? No; you’re just a layperson who reads it at face value, and categorically states that it is entirely one hundred percent correct. You even go so far as to arrogantly

dismiss the shared consensus of scholars and the hundreds of years of accredited biblical research. Frankly, I will take their expert conclusions over your opinion any day of the week, and twice on Sunday. That you even have the audacity to presume you are correct, with all the assurance of your convictions and not the *slightest* clue what you're talking about, is astonishing. Yet, your attitude is not in the least surprising."

"Well, you tell me that I am wrong because my beliefs contradict what you think you know, but the points you make are also just your opinions."

"Yes, but I am citing scholarly research and *facts*, not opinions. However, yours *are* opinions, based on nothing more than a belief. Can you seriously not tell the difference between a belief and a fact? Or, are you just unwilling to acknowledge uncomfortable truths? Not that you would let reality get in the way of your mental deceptions. While there are sources that dispute and cast doubt upon the generally accepted scholarly versions, I'd wager a healthy sum that those voices would be long-winded, apologetic theologians using circular arguments to defend their faith, which is far from an academically valid argument. At least my reasoning is based on the centuries of evidence compiled from the research and consensus of most biblical scholars and archaeologists, whom I have cited today at length."

"What evidence? You only refer to books and scholars that back up what you already think, so that just demonstrates your own bias," Linda asserted.

"And you don't? God," Jeff retorted in total exasperation at the blatant irony, "you are so blinded by faith you can't even see the hypocrisy in that statement. Moreover, accusing me of bias is brazenly counterintuitive, as I don't think being correct can technically be considered a bias. I will leave that little linguistic thought experiment for the philosophers to ponder and expand upon at length. Though, I am pretty sure being right is just a fact and not an interpretation."

"To be fair, I will admit I am biased towards *real* evidence and that my reasoning is shaped by these facts. Therefore, my arguments will lean towards the sources I cite in support of my positions, rather than using references obviously based on mere beliefs. You won't even admit you are biased by faith, by a book you have been spoon-fed to believe in since the day you were born. Religion, it's like baby food for the hearts and souls of impressionable minds."

"I am *not* biased! Ours is the spiritual truth, and I don't care about your so-called *evidence*," Linda denounced, while adding a particular note of disdain to the last word, sort of like she was sniffing a turd and sucking on a lemon at the same time.

"Dismissing factual evidence in place of spiritual beliefs, that is very enlightened of you. There are words for people who hold irrationally to discredited premises through sheer faith at the expense of reason. Stubborn comes to mind, but I think oblivious is a much better descriptive term."

"I find your attitude completely insulting. *How dare you* dismiss the beliefs of the faithful as oblivious!" Linda fumed with righteous indignation.

"I didn't say all believers were oblivious, so stop putting words in my mouth. I said those who reject reason in favor of blind faith were."

"You're so cynical!"

"No, I'm a rationalist; the cynicism is just a by-product of observing the delusions in others around me."

"Delusions! Now you casually denounce believers as suffering delusions?"

"If the shoe fits, yes, I guess I do. How else do you explain the lengths people have gone to over the millennia to convince themselves of the utterly improbable things they devoutly believe?"

Turning dark red with rage, Linda cursed, "God will surely judge you for your blasphemies and cast you into hell for all eternity!"

"I doubt it," Jeff brushed off the damnation casually. "If there is a day of reckoning, and I am sure there won't be, how do you think your God would judge me compared to you? One of us goes on a quest to look beyond the rhetoric for the truth, while the other one blindly follows false dogma. I think my chances are pretty good of getting a pat on the head and a gold star, as I doubt this loving God of yours would condemn me for seeking the truth. However, I note that like all extremists, you revert to form whenever someone challenges or contradicts your beliefs: you call your opponents names. Heretic, atheist, Satanist, whatever; it's all so mature and enlightened of you. Maybe you should ask yourself why you get so openly hostile whenever anyone questions some stupid tenet of your faith. You should examine those feelings and you might just discover the painful truth that your inner doubts are fueling the misplaced anger you direct at me."

"You make me angry because you dare to challenge my faith."

“Why shouldn’t I challenge your faith? Is your faith so fragile and weak that it can’t withstand even the merest scrutiny without your kind having a primal reaction and going on the attack? Is your supposedly all-powerful God unable to withstand rational inquiry, or does he flee in impotent terror at the first sign of skeptical reasoning? I’d say your defensiveness speaks more to your own insecurities about the mythologies of your faith, rather than my impudence for daring to question your God.

“Deep down you might question, but I bet you are too afraid to look carefully in case you don’t like what you see. Though, I suppose it makes sense, as what devout believer would ever seriously consider evidence that jeopardizes everything they’ve held sacred? How many people do you know that would admit they’ve been led down the garden path for their entire lives, and that they’ve been conned by the system? What would it say about you, your innermost self as defined by your beliefs, if abruptly everything you held so dear was suddenly called into question? Faith is a powerful tool and most people can’t, or won’t, bring themselves to give up something that’s been such an essential part of their lives for so long. You feel all you will be left with is a soulless void, and you’re scared as hell to look into that God-sized hole. I’d say most people don’t have the strength of character, or the confidence, to face their fears and challenge the very essence of their being. Instead, they blindly stumble on oblivious to the truth, and get indignant and defensive whenever anyone tries to shatter the cheap facade of their mental and spiritual house of cards.

“Perhaps, privately, you recognize that the Bible is full of errors and contradictions, but you choose to overlook them anyway. To compensate, you concoct infinitely more bizarre and insane rationales to dismiss these errors. Errors you claim to be nonexistent with the help of exhaustive journeys into apologetic horse manure, leaving reality further and further behind in a sad and desperate attempt to justify your doctrines and defend your tenuous beliefs. This is such a blatant act of willful self-delusion, so far past reason, that it is almost beyond ridicule itself—almost.”

“Why do you ridicule our beliefs?” Linda reacted angrily to her religion being described in such an insulting way.

“I ridicule your beliefs for the very reason that your beliefs are ridiculous. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter in 1816, ‘Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions.’ What other stance can be adopted when dealing with people for whom reason so obviously doesn’t get through, except to resort to being dismissive no matter how offensive that might be? If I believed in Thor, Zeus, Jupiter, or leprechauns, fairies, and wizards, you would ridicule me, too. Let’s be honest, you would *not* respect my feelings simply on the basis that they were my deeply held beliefs and do the politically correct tap dance of sanctity around the minefield of my religious faith. Not only would you openly mock me for having such insane beliefs in the invisible realm of make-believe characters, but you would also quite rightly brand me as a fool.

“If you had ever been allowed to read George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, you might be familiar with the concept of doublethink, which fundamentalists so enthusiastically employ with ever-increasing zeal. However, I am guessing it was banned here because a social commentary about a totalitarian regime full of thought police was a wee bit too close for comfort.”

“What is doublethink?” Linda asked, wary of hearing the answer.

“Hang on, let me get my illegal copy and cite it for you directly:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic . . . and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself. That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed.

Jumping to the next highlighted passage, he continued,

Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. . . . To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary.

“Doublethink pretty much sums up the fundamentalist mindset when it comes to knowing about, and deliberately ignoring, the errors and inconsistencies in the Bible. However, now that I think about it, maybe unthink is a more descriptive word. Especially, considering the collective way in which all of you surrender your common sense so you don’t have to be bothered with the hassles of thinking at all. Rational people are left with only one conclusion when it comes to willful Christian unthink,” Jeff stated as he quoted from Orwell’s book again, “‘the prevailing mental condition must be controlled insanity.’ Unfortunately, your particular fundamentalist brand of inerrancy has created exactly this kind of mental condition, as your literal doctrines leave you absolutely no wiggle room whatsoever to think for yourselves.”

“It is still not polite to question the religious beliefs of others,” Linda stated, matter-of-factly.

“I had a feeling you would play that card eventually, so I came prepared,” Jeff said as he removed a newspaper clipping from his notes. “So, you think that people should not be allowed to criticize Christian beliefs like the ones that drove Anglicans back to the Catholic Church in 2009? These *open-minded* people were upset over things like the ordination of homosexuals and female clergy within the Church of England, and so Pope Benedict XVI offered an olive branch to these unenlightened apostates of the Vatican and invited them to return to the more rigidly intolerant atmosphere of the Catholic Church. In a *New York Times* ethics [blog](#) about this very topic titled, *Can We Talk About Religion, Please?*, the author Randy Cohen summed up this hands-off argument rather eloquently:

Other of my critics have argued that actions undertaken as a religious duty occupy a privileged place. But merely designating something “religious” does not exempt it from ethical analysis. The roster of historic enormities justified by religious doctrine is too long and too familiar to bear repeating. . . .

. . . But surely it is possible to disagree respectfully. To criticize a particular practice of Orthodox Jews need not be anti-Semitism. To denounce this Vatican policy need not be anti-Catholic bigotry. Criticism is not contempt. . . .

. . . Nevertheless, we should stop talking about religious matters only in diffident whispers, and the observant should stop expecting us to do so.

“So, by what social custom are the outdated ideas of religious beliefs immune, and/or exempt, from critical analysis just because? Why, only in matters of faith, are people allowed to get away with being totally irrational and then they get to hide behind the excuse that it is impolite to challenge this kind of behavior? Please don’t misunderstand me; I’m not attacking faith in a higher power itself, just the illogical resistance to consider factual information. This mentality is nothing more than an excuse for the faithful to avoid uncomfortable truths in the first place, by opting out and playing the ‘you can’t criticize my religious beliefs’ card.

“The dogma, doctrine, or theological premise of any religion is *not* above criticism or ethical analysis, and the believers in these faiths do not get to wish and proclaim that their beliefs are simply not open to discussion. All religions have undergone some degree of theological and doctrinal evolution throughout their histories, so why should we be prohibited from discussing it at the risk of hurting someone’s feelings?

“In no other discipline or debate would questionable claims automatically get a free pass from being challenged, just because it might contradict what someone believes. A person who dismissed common knowledge and proven facts in any other topic of a nonreligious nature would be branded as unreasonable, but when it comes to religion—for some mysterious reason—this is not the case. Let me give you an example, say an accountant who insisted that ten times ten equals one thousand and not one hundred. This hypothetical accountant takes this position, simply because that’s what he’s been *told to believe* all his life and so he stubbornly holds onto this thinking, despite example after example of mathematical proof. What would you say to this person?”

“I would tell him he was an idiot,” Linda replied.

Jeff just stared at her in silence and waited for the elephant in the room to make itself known. When she didn’t make the connection, he continued, “So, if you would never take someone like that seriously, then why does society let religious beliefs off the hook so easily? And let’s face the harsh truth that the faithful do have a long history of surrendering their critical thinking skills to religious authority—like parents who refuse to get their sick children medical help because they are waiting for God to intervene. Therefore, we *should* question the character of people who so willingly hand over the keys to their brains and let Jesus take

the wheel. The religious faithful can give no good reason why the rest of us should allow them to get away with turning their reason on and off like a light switch.”

“How do we turn our reason on and off at will?” Linda demanded.

“I thought it was rather obvious, but I guess you need me to spell it out for you. Okay then, here it comes: the way you bend your entire reality to fit the biblical creation narrative. Your insistence in believing that God created the universe in six days, only six thousand years ago, and how humans must, therefore, have coexisted with dinosaurs. How you also literally interpret the story of Noah’s Ark, where every species of the planet was rounded up in pairs to save them from a global flood, and the insane explanation that this is how fossils ended up on top of mountains. How you deny evolution is even possible by ignoring and then claiming there is no evidence for intermediate species in the fossil record, or the so-called gaps you attack. Fundamentalist Christians are completely oblivious that this fossil evidence has been found and thoroughly documented by scientists. And, the way you feebly attack the word theory and all the other irrational justifications you are forced to think up in order to deny the reams of scientific evidence that this planet is *billions* of years old, all just to support your misguided belief in a plagiarized pagan myth.

“Instead, you are left insisting that the creation story is a scientifically viable explanation for the origins of the universe—which is categorically and totally ridiculous—and as a result of these literal beliefs, you are all forced to jam five billion years of Earth history into a six-thousand-year timeframe. Refusing to acknowledge anything astronomical, geological, or whatever—cal that conflicts with your outdated, brain-dead theology is just plain sad and only demonstrates your willful disregard for reality. To be brutally honest, the evangelical insistence on teaching creationism is not only *completely* deluded, but it is also intellectually dishonest.”

“Oh, why don’t you just admit that you hate Christians,” an exasperated Linda blurted out. “You should let the spirit of Jesus into your heart and then you would see the light.”

“No, I don’t hate Christians. I just prefer to think for myself and not rely on ancient books to do it for me. Though, heaven knows why I even bother trying to explain these things to you in the first place.”

“Beats me, I wish you’d just shut your mouth and open your heart to Jesus for once.”

“I’ll open my heart to Jesus when you open your mind. You go first, I’ll wait. I suppose I should heed the adage ‘never argue with a fool; onlookers may not be able to tell the difference,’ as I think the line has started to blur while I tried in vain to provide a glimmer of illumination and understanding on the origins of your beliefs.

“I get so frustrated by the fact that we as humans can’t seem to get out of our own collective way. We have so much potential and if we could only free our minds and stop holding ourselves back, we could accomplish so much more. As Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Critic as Artist*, ‘There is no sin except stupidity,’ and we certainly seem to have an overabundance of that on this planet. The real sin is the deliberate abandoning of intellect and the ability to totally subjugate rational thinking. It is this talent for the conscious surrender of reason which allows people to believe wholeheartedly in the most absurd tenets of their faith; beliefs that defy logic, nature, and are solely the products of a wild imagination. This is a sad testament to the weakness of our spirit and the power of the human mind to delude itself into believing the most irrational things that televangelists, witch doctors, shamans, priests, and infallible popes have been exploiting mercilessly for eons. And which, sadly, we let them get away with, with our willing permission.

“Sadly, there is no better example of the sin of willful ignorance than that demonstrated by modern fundamentalists and their desire to completely and deliberately abdicate reason. For fundamentalists, reason and religion are like two magnets that repel each other, given that facts are to the blind faithful as a vacuum is to nature—totally abhorrent. Then again, fundamentalism is fundamentally illogical.”

“Are you done yet with your character assassination of just about everyone in the Christian States,” Linda asked resentfully, “or are there a few more groups of people you would like to insult and mock?”

“I think I pretty much covered it all. And I am not mocking everyone, just the fundamentalist mindset, because for them when religion comes in the door, reason goes right out the window. Sorry, I couldn’t resist getting in one last shot.”

“You really have a disturbing problem with religion,” Linda scolded. “Why can’t you just leave us alone to believe what we want?”

“We shouldn’t leave evangelical Christians alone to wreak havoc on society, for the same reasons we don’t let children play with sharp objects: it is inherently dangerous to do so. And, to compound the problems with the whole situation, you are trying to push your flawed beliefs onto others by dictating

government and educational policies, in many cases against the public will, and despite the fact that they are based on lies and forgeries.”

“Our beliefs are *not* flawed, we just have our own interpretation,” Linda protested vehemently.

“From the inspirational perspective of religion, your interpretation *is* flawed. The literal and inerrant fundamentalist understanding of the Bible completely ignores the mystical and spiritual side of faith. As much as it scares you to consider this possibility, refusing to admit the Bible is full of symbolic stories and that it contains errors is *not* synonymous with losing your faith in God.”

“But these are core elements of our faith,” Linda cried.

“And why do literal, inerrant interpretations of the Bible have to be a core element of your faith?”

“Because our beliefs say we have to believe that,” Linda said in circular obtuseness.

“That is an excuse not to answer the question, not an answer in and of itself. It is also an answer that is impossible to take seriously, given the tremendous amount of evidence against this ideological belief.”

“But, if I start to challenge some of my beliefs, then I cast doubt on the validity of the Gospels and open up everything else in the Bible to questioning,” Linda protested in worry.

“Why do you think that by letting go of one idiotic tenet of your faith, that you open the floodgates to all of your beliefs crumbling? You can’t justify the belief that every word is inerrant when there are *lots* of blatant errors, and there is documented evidence that the passages you read today were corrupted over time and don’t match the older texts from which they were copied. It is also senseless to build literal interpretations on top of a religion that has mythical origins.

“The people who believe in the absolute, literal truth of biblical histories are either unknowingly or willfully ignorant of the historical facts, and there is no excuse for that in today’s information age. Historical facts such as how religious beliefs—all beliefs, not just the monotheistic ones—originally crystallized in the first place. This dialogue between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers from *The Power of Myth* masterfully articulated this very point.

Campbell: The idea of the supernatural as being something over and above the natural is a killing idea. In the Middle Ages, this was the idea that finally turned that world into something like a wasteland, a land where people were living inauthentic lives; never doing a thing they truly wanted to because the supernatural laws required them to live as directed by their clergy. In a wasteland, people are fulfilling purposes that are not properly theirs but have been put upon them as inescapable laws. This is a killer. . . . The spirit is really the bouquet of life. It is not something breathed into life, it comes out of life. This is one of the glorious things about the mother-goddess religions, where the world is the body of the Goddess, divine in itself, and divinity isn’t something ruling over and above a fallen nature. . . .

. . . However, our story of the Fall in the Garden sees nature as corrupt; and that myth corrupts the whole world for us. Because nature is thought of as corrupt, every spontaneous act is sinful and must not be yielded to. You get a totally different civilization and a totally different way of living according to whether your myth presents nature as fallen or whether nature is in itself a manifestation of divinity, and the spirit is the revelation of the divinity that is inherent in nature. . . .

. . . Moyers: Geography has done a great deal to shape our culture and our idea of religion. The god of the desert is not the god of the plains—

Campbell: —or the god of the rain forest—the gods, plural, of the rain forest. When you’re out in the desert with one sky and one world, then you might have one deity, but in a jungle, where there’s no horizon and you never see anything more than ten or twelve yards away from you, you don’t have that idea anymore.

Moyers: So are they projecting their idea of God on the world?

Campbell: Yes, of course.

Moyers: Their geography shapes their image of divinity, and then they project it out and call it God.

Campbell: Yes. The god idea is always culturally conditioned, always. . . .

... Moyers: So many of the religions began with their own hero stories. The whole of the Orient has been blessed with the teaching of the good law brought back by Buddha, and the Occident has been blessed by the laws Moses brought back from Sinai. The tribal or local heroes perform their deeds for a single folk, and universal heroes like Muhammad, Jesus, and Buddha bring the message from afar. These heroes of religion came back with the wonder of God, not with a blueprint of God.

Campbell: Well, you find an awful lot of laws in the Old Testament.

Moyers: But that's the transformation of religion to theology. Religion begins with the sense of wonder and awe and the attempt to tell stories that will connect us to God. Then it becomes a set of theological works in which everything is reduced to a code, to a creed.

Campbell: That's the reduction of mythology to theology. Mythology is very fluid. Most of the myths are self-contradictory. ... Then theology comes along and says it has got to be just this way.

"This is the great lie of religion. Mythology is metaphorical and meant to be instructive, like the creation stories used to explain the world, or about the challenges we all face in life. Theology ignores this, and thus, it corrupts the underlying truth."

"What is that truth?" Linda ventured cautiously.

"That life is suffering. We must learn to deal with life and accept it as is, suffering and all. That is the subtle meaning contained within the story of Jonah, where the whale is the metaphor: to go inside ourselves, to face the abyss, and come out transformed. The great truth is that the spark of the divine is within, not without. This is why the same myths pop up all over the world in different forms, but the substance is essentially the same. All humans, in all cultures, face the same existential realities."

"I don't believe any of that," Linda categorically denied.

"Then you're not ready to hear it, or you're not at a place in your life where you are capable of comprehending it, yet. Religion belongs in the realm of the spiritual, yet you guys in your desperate attempt to impose your fundamentalist nonsense onto the rest of us, irrationally insist on projecting biblical symbolism into the real world. This stretches religion beyond the bounds of myth into the world of logic, where it cannot possibly hope to stand up against reason; but religion isn't supposed to be reasonable, it's supposed to be other-worldly. By pulling religion out of its spiritual dimension and insisting that its mythology must be considered the absolute truth in the real world, is exactly where fundamentalists lose all credibility.

"You believe wholeheartedly in God and his love, good for you, wonderful, I feel the love. However, insisting that a primitive campfire story must be the way the universe was created, and that this must be taught as an alternative to evolution in science classes, is ridiculous. It also proves beyond a shadow of a doubt how fundamentalist interpretations completely overlook the symbolism at the root of all theologies. Karen Armstrong summed up your denominations doctrine rather succinctly when she said, 'Protestant fundamentalists had perverted myth in a different way. They had turned the Christian myths into scientific facts, and had created a hybrid that was neither good science nor good religion. This had run counter to the whole tradition of spirituality and had involved great strain, since religious truth is not rational in nature and cannot be proved scientifically.'

"Mixing symbolism with reality is a great recipe for the half-baked thinking we see every time politicians—Republican presidential candidates especially—and beauty contestants start tripping over themselves to see who can be the first, or the loudest, to proclaim their stupidity to the whole world. It would be hilarious for those of us in the thinking classes to watch if it wasn't so pathetic, sad, and frustrating.

"Other religions and denominations, like mainstream Protestants, Reform and Conservative Jews, an enlightened group of intellectual Muslims, and even the Vatican believe that their respective scriptures are meant to be interpreted symbolically, and are open to the idea that they should be studied critically. I applaud them for that open-mindedness, the same of which cannot be said for fundamentalists of any ideology. Fundamentalist Christians, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and most Muslims get distracted by the literal, strict interpretation and observation of the words in their respective holy books that they miss the underlying symbolism. Fundamentalists, in their idealistic pursuit for literal understandings of these primitive texts, get so wrapped up in the letter of the law that they completely miss the spirit of their religions.

“This symbolism was used as a tool for explaining the wonders of the universe to human minds incapable of conceiving things far beyond their limited understanding in ancient times. Science now explains the natural world, and the education and legal systems now provide the moral framework societies live by, replacing the fear that religion employed to scare people into behaving. As a society, we have collectively outgrown religion, which is *long* past its expiry date. And, let’s face the facts that humanity has proven, rather emphatically again and again, that it’s not mature enough to handle religion.

“Look, I know you are hesitant about questioning the fundamental doctrines of your faith. But, I’m here to tell you, brothers and sisters,” Jeff started to intone like an exuberant revivalist preacher building to a gloriously ecstatic climax, “you can still believe in God without believing in the absolute inerrancy of the Bible. I tell you, my children,” he paused building ever higher, “millions of believers all over the world do it every day without it affecting the validity of their faith. Can I get a hallelujah? Amen, brothers and sisters. Goodnight, thank you, and may your gods go with you.”

“Why would you support spirituality if you are so anti-religion?” Linda asked, genuinely confused by the apparent inconsistency.

“Why? Because humanity will never fully put religion behind us, or eliminate the primal uncertainty that drives the individual need for spiritual comfort, so why fight it? In the end, it would just be a futile struggle, and we secular humanists just end up looking as rabid and inflexible as fundamentalists. Some might call that stance accommodationist, but let’s be realistic. Secularists can challenge the mindset instilled by religion, and we will probably win over the vast majority in due time, but we will never totally do away with religion. We cannot prove a negative that God doesn’t exist, and science can never answer the question of why we are here.

“So, if people desire a spiritual connection to provide that reassurance in an uncertain world, then they are free to pursue their individual needs. However, I do think if there was a God it would have made its presence known without question. And don’t give me that faith line. That’s a lame, cop-out excuse and you, me, and everyone else knows it. If a God truly existed, it has had thousands of years to manifest its existence and put an end to all the speculation and heated disputes.

“However, maybe we should compromise and make the best of an imperfect situation. You keep your spiritual connection to meet your needs, but please, do away with the primitive religious dogma and legends that still cause so much hatred, division, and ignorance. Do we have a deal?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Linda said, standing her ground.

“I didn’t think you would agree, anyway. Religion is too deeply ingrained in the human psyche for people of faith to give it up without a serious fight to the death. Still, maybe there will come a time in the not-too-distant future when people no longer feel the need for spiritual booster chairs to give them artificial strength. Nevertheless, what all religions desperately need, if they have any hope of surviving the secular juggernaut of reason, are young, open-minded leaders with fresh ideas. They need leaders with the guts to stand up and say ‘we’re starting over, we are not infallible, and some of these doctrines are garbage. We are going to set most of this rubbish aside and focus on loving our neighbors, charity, and compassion for all humankind.’

“The core messages of moral responsibility have gotten lost amid the mythical pre-histories of Israel, and the false dogma that has made the three monotheistic faiths so rigid, inflexible, and intolerant. This is a shame, because the message of human rights in Deuteronomy—which was, and remains, a noble ideal—is the true legacy of the Hebrew Bible and the religions it spawned. It’s too bad mankind messed everything up so badly, and that so many people overlook these ideals.

“Your faith makes you happy, it makes you feel there is a purpose to life and provides comfort to you, but it also blinds and keeps you rounded up like sheep, which, quite honestly, is a travesty of the human condition. You can, however, critically examine your beliefs and still have a spiritual relationship with the god of your choice. If there is a God, and that’s a big if, why do we need all these different religions, denominations, and centuries of accumulated incidental doctrines stapled to a belief in this higher power?

“As the Dalai Lama wisely wrote in his essay *Kindness and Compassion*, ‘There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.’ Why can’t there be a universal, personal, and individual spiritual connection independent of all this dogma, as the D.L. says? There might be more love and understanding in the world if we eliminated all the false history and doctrinal fairytales, and focused instead on pure spirituality. That might help to rid the religious world of the ‘us-versus-them’ mentality. Then, maybe, I wouldn’t have such a bug up my rear

about religion and the attitudes it creates. But, don't hold your breath," Jeff concluded with a tongue-in-cheek smile.

"All I am arguing is that it is not necessary for a literal adherence to figurative sagas—meant to inspire and unite an ancient people—for spiritual faith to be realized. How does an unwavering acceptance of the biblical creation story contribute to an individual's spiritual and personal connection to God, anyway? Mystics didn't need false beliefs to find their internal path, yet certain conservative orthodoxies insist all this extra nonsense is a fundamental part of true religion. And, I never said you have to think the way I do, or that you are wrong to believe in a spiritual realm. I just pointed out the beliefs you have in the absolutes of the Bible are, in fact, neither absolute, nor scientifically truthful. As I have stressed repeatedly, it is this one particular doctrine of your belief, the inerrant and literal interpretation of the Bible, which is absurd from a purely rational and objective perspective."

"All of your arguments aside, Mr. Spicoli, you still haven't proven that the underlying core of Christianity is wrong—that the resurrected Christ saved humankind with his sacrifice," Mr. Hand deflected unquestioningly.

"Dude, have you heard a word I've said? You believe in the imminent second coming of Christ, but do you actually believe that if Jesus returned now he would even recognize the corrupted teachings and the religion founded upon him? Christians are fond of asking, 'what would Jesus do?' That's a good question, what would that apocalyptic, itinerant, *Jewish* preacher from Galilee do about the horror his ministry has morphed into? I don't know, probably a primal scream and some hysterical wailing and gnashing of teeth to go with it.

"Christians for the last two thousand years have believed that Jesus was the Son of Man, born of a virgin, crucified as the messiah, and resurrected for our salvation. Christians have also reimagined Jesus as the new-and-improved God with three split personalities, and the righteous smiter of arrogant, mouthy little bastards like me. Christian beliefs are so far removed from the original message of Jesus—as foretold by an obviously deluded human preacher that the imminent arrival of the earthly Kingdom was to be delivered by an imaginary angel—that Christians are no longer even in the same ballpark, let alone playing the same game. A preacher who, I might add, excluded the likes of you and all your unworthy Gentile ancestors from his Kingdom of love and tolerance. These beliefs are so ridiculous that Jesus himself would either burst out laughing at how badly his followers have screwed up his life story, or be indignant with rage at the fact that you have so blasphemously deified and dared to compare him to his God."

"Enough, Mr. Spicoli!" roared the outraged Mr. Hand. "I've had as much as I am going to take of you poisoning the minds of your fellow students with falsehoods and smearing the good name of our Lord and savior. Please leave my class; to the High Inquisitor's office with you. Perhaps he can illuminate you with the one and only universal truth."

"I'm only citing documented historical facts. Why should I be punished for that?"

"Silence, Mr. Spicoli. I have made my decision, now please leave my class before you and your filth do any more damage to the young minds under my care."

As our young protagonist quietly packed up his books and made his way to the door with a hesitant and dreading step, Mr. Hand reasserted control of the class. "Miss Barrett, please come to the front of the class with your Bible and read aloud from Matthew 1:1. Perhaps hearing about the birth of Jesus is what all of you need to purge the lies you just heard."

"Yes, Mr. Hand."

Miss Barrett slid out of her seat, and as she reached the front of the class, the door shut behind Jeff with an ominous click.

Chapter 11:

Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.
Hanlon's Razor

In The High Inquisitor's Office At Ridgemont High . . .

"Come in, Mr. Spicoli," called the fear-inducing voice from within the office of the High Inquisitor, Righteous Richard Torquemada. "It seems you and I are destined to keep meeting like this. What seems to be the trouble this time?"

"I'm not sure, High Inquisitor. Apparently, Mr. Hand has a problem with acknowledged facts in his history class."

"What facts would those be?"

"Oh, things like how monotheistic dogma has morphed over time, or how major additions to accepted Christian doctrines have fundamentally changed the initial message."

"I see," he nodded thoughtfully, but Jeff wasn't so sure he did see. "You know this how?"

"Uh, books. You know paper and words, lots of interesting facts. Perhaps you've opened one that wasn't a Bible? Also, from watching history documentaries, and there's lots of information available on the internet, too."

"How did you access this information, Mr. Spicoli? Under the Puritan Act, any books not approved by our censors were banned, and the C.F.C.C. restricts access to controversial programming. Did you also breach the Heaven's Gate firewall? I am aware of the growing underground activity in accessing illegal internet sites, so I presume you're involved."

"We call it the Wall of Jericho."

"Interesting, the Wall of Jericho was brought down."

"Aptly named then, don't you think, Inquisitor?"

"Hmmm," the Inquisitor murmured in consideration. "Mr. Hand texted me that you have been inciting trouble again in your C.S. history class, specifically, that you have been provoking dissent about the divinity of Jesus this time. Tell me, Mr. Spicoli, in your opinion what makes up the Trinity?"

"Are you by any chance referring to the pious fraud perpetrated on Christianity in 325 CE?"

"I am not amused, Mr. Spicoli. I'll ask again, what is the Trinity?"

"What is how a Roman emperor and a handful of bishops duped all of Christendom, Alex?"

"Would you care to explain that comment?"

"Seriously, you need me to explain to you, his Righteousness, the significance behind the most important fundamental shift in Christian history?"

"Answer the question, Mr. Spicoli, and spare me the humor."

"It would be over your head, anyway."

The Inquisitor felt the urge to lash out and smack the smart-mouthed little brat, as a gleam of indignation flared in his eyes. Being looked down upon by those who dared to question his power, or his intelligence, infuriated him like nothing else and never failed to push his buttons. Like so many petty, small-minded bureaucratic officials throughout human history, he delighted in abusing his position and toying with those he found under his control. Privately, Dick was very sensitive about his limited I.Q., a failing he tried hard to make up for with personal zeal. The passion with which he carried out his duties, and his absolute devotion to higher authority, made him the ideal lap dog for rigidly enforcing official state doctrine.

"Please, answer the question, Mr. Spicoli. Why do you feel . . . what was your phrasing . . . that all of Christendom was duped?"

"I would have to explain it in excruciating detail."

"Then explain it to me."

Like you're a toddler, Jeff thought, but wisely didn't add. "Okay." He paused, collecting his thoughts on where to begin and then he repeated what he had said in the history class, giving a summary that led up to the Council of Nicaea and the heated doctrinal arguments and divisions that threatened to tear the early Church apart.

The Inquisitor interrupted the explanation to clarify a point, "What doctrinal arguments?"

"The growing split surrounding Arius and his thoughts about the nature of Jesus, whether he was of the same or similar substance as God."

“Arius, the heretic?”

“You are showing your bias against him, and yet you know nothing at all of the history, or how his name came to be unfairly tarnished.”

“The Church fathers could not have been wrong.”

“Oh, right, of course not, never. Where in the Gospels was Jesus ever quoted as stating unequivocally that he was God? He is attributed as calling God his father, but that was meant as a spiritual father, not an actual one. These references were taken out of context and exploited by those who wanted to raise Jesus to divine status in pursuit of their own agendas. The disciples certainly did not equate Jesus with God, or with being divine in any way. They, and early Christians, merely thought that he was an inspired prophet teaching a new message of love and charity. Some may have thought he was the messiah or the Son of Man, but not God. However, after his apocalyptic message had been forgotten, the Church fathers and later New Testament writers were able to take great leeway in claiming who he was.”

“Surely, Jesus and the Gospels are not wrong.”

“Yeah, surely not,” Jeff replied, mockingly.

“Explain that, please.”

“I already went over it this morning in class and I really don’t feel like explaining it all over again. Though, I am pretty confident you only believe in Christianity and the truth of the Gospels, because of a principle known as *cuius regio, eius religio*,” Jeff stated.

“What? What is the meaning of that?” Dick pressed him on the significance of the obscure reference.

“It simply means ‘whose realm, his religion.’ Thanks to ideas like the divine right of kings, whenever a sovereign decided to change his or her religion, so too did all their subjects—and usually against their wills.”

“What are you trying to imply? Elaborate on that, please,” the Inquisitor ordered.

“Probably the most globally significant historical event, the one that has had the most far-reaching implications for billions of people over the past two thousand five hundred years, was the Deuteronomistic reform of Judah’s King Josiah. These reforms put monotheism on track to influence Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of which came about because of one king and his decision that created a ripple effect throughout the rest of world history.

“This one decision was able to have such a major impact because Paul started preaching an early form of Jewish-Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Then the religion started spreading within the empire, as it was transmitted via the trading and administrative networks, across vast territories and the number of different cultures under Rome’s domain. Christianity’s subsequent adoption by later Roman emperors gave the religion the longevity to influence all of Western society ever since. Later, Muhammad, an Arabian merchant who would have come into contact with traders from the Roman Empire, drew from both Jewish and Christian traditions in creating the Islamic version of monotheism and its subsequent spread around the world.

“Throughout history, many monarchs, and their decisions have been heavily influenced by their respective religious advisers, and that influence has had profound effects. Josiah assumed the throne at the age of eight, and you would be a fool to think that his beliefs were not shaped by the Temple priests, like Hilkiah, who guided his upbringing. These priests were instrumental in guiding the monotheistic reforms and the centralization of the Hebrew cult that took place during Josiah’s reign. Constantine and Theodosius, who both impacted the course of Christian history, had their faith directed by men from religious orders that supported the Trinity interpretation. These are men who preached their own understandings, men who sought to affect and influence the religious direction their rulers, and by association, their empires would take. Men like Cardinal Richelieu, adviser to Louis XIII, who as Chief Minister of France was responsible for suppressing the Protestant Huguenots. Or, men like Cardinal Wolsey and the sadistic Thomas More, who were two of Henry VIII’s closest advisers.

“One of the more notorious things More is remembered for was the delight he took in burning people at the stake for daring to print the Bible in English. Printing Bibles in local languages made it infinitely harder for the clergy to confuse and mislead their congregations. When only the clergy knew Latin, and therefore provided the interpretations, they controlled the stairway to heaven. As people began to read and understand for themselves, it opened the door for the research of the scholars that I have cited today; a process which has undermined the implied historic truth of religious beliefs. Maybe More was right to be afraid of losing power, as the past few hundred years of scholarly and secular history have demonstrated, for surely he foresaw that this would be the start of the long, slippery decline into obscurity for Church authority.

“Henry VIII is one of the best examples of whose realm, his religion given the impact his break with the Vatican, and the founding of the Church of England, had on the entire English-speaking Western world. This monumental change directly impacts us here today in America, as English Protestants later immigrated to the New World bringing their Calvinist ideals, which have shaped the development of American society during the last four hundred years. Many people know the story of Henry VIII, but most don’t understand why Henry broke with Rome, or realize the global repercussions his decision had on Western history through British imperialism.

“There was a very good reason for Pope Clement VII to decline Henry’s request for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, as she just happened to be the daughter of Spain’s Queen Isabella. She also just happened to be the auntie of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the man holding the pope hostage following the sack of Rome in 1527. Maybe you have heard of Chuck before, like when he presided over the Diet of Worms in 1521 to deal with that troublemaking upstart, Martin Luther, and his ninety-five theses. As the pope couldn’t grant the divorce to Henry, due to having Chuck’s hands around his throat, Henry took matters into his own hands. He told the pope to take a hike and started the Church of England, of which he made himself the head and gave himself a divorce.

“Once the monarchs of England converted, many ordinary citizens felt compelled to switch teams, as well; although, there had already been a large and growing Protestant movement within the kingdom, as with elsewhere in Europe. When Henry and Catherine’s Catholic daughter ascended the throne, she reversed Edward VI’s—her short-lived brother—Protestant reforms in favor of her mother’s Catholicism. For her overzealous methods, she became known to history as Bloody Mary. When she died and Henry’s Protestant daughter, Elizabeth I, took over you can guess what happened next, as England has been Protestant ever since. This religious ideological fight between the successive monarchs was all because of principles like whose realm, his religion, and it was the unfortunate people who were caught in the middle.

“In time, following the years of bloody conversions, the descendants of these British subjects happily got on with their lives as Protestant members of a newly founded religious denomination. Most never gave a second thought as to why they were Anglican, or to the conversion of their Catholic ancestors. As the British Empire spread around the world, including the Puritans who were among the first American colonists, these settlers took with them the Protestant faith of their British ancestors who converted under the flip-flopping Tudor dynasty. Generally, the religion of the typical, white American family has been Protestant ever since. It is only because of whose realm, his religion that the original majority of American families and their descendants were Protestant and not Catholic, through no conscious choice of their own.

“If the men whose decisions have come down through the ages had different beliefs, the religion you were born into would likely be different, as well. If no Roman emperor had converted, the West might have remained pagan instead of Christian, because changing any of the factors surrounding the creation of a state religion would have had profound and fundamental impacts upon subsequent history. Now, don’t you think that is a rather arbitrary and subjective reason for being whatever religion one is brought up in? Your religion, and that of your parents, was purely an accident of birth. It was decided for all of you long ago, based on the random whim of the lord of the realm your ancestors happened to live in.

“All of you just merrily go along with your predetermined religious faith, century after century, indoctrinating one generation after another in the same tradition. The exception being adult converts, obviously, but then, even they go on to raise their kids in their newfound faith who grow up and continue the cycle. For every adult you can show me that’s made a conscious decision about their faith, I can show you legion upon legion that have been told what to believe since birth. Reassuringly, I can also show you millions who, after being brainwashed as children, made an illuminated and adult decision that all of this is insane.”

Finally, after listening quietly to this history lesson and lengthy sermon, though typically absorbing none of it, the Inquisitor spoke up. “Frankly, Mr. Spicoli, I tire of your nonsense. While we have been sitting here chatting, the school staff have searched your locker and just sent me an email with their findings. They have confiscated the Jefferson and New Revised Standard Version Bibles they found in your possession. Due to the glaring omissions in these translations that our scholars discredited long ago, these Bibles are not on the approved list of textbooks for this school. Nor are many of the other sources from which you spew your lies and propaganda in an attempt to pollute the minds of your fellow students and lure them away from the one, true faith. Our conversation is over. If you will follow me, please,” the Inquisitor commanded, rising from his chair and walking around the desk to the door.

Screaming can be heard emanating from somewhere in the school basement, though the sound is muffled by distance and closed doors. No student paid any attention, for they knew the rumors of what would happen to any student that questioned authority, especially as blatantly as they knew Jeff had done that day. They were too conditioned by fear to respond to the screams, so they blissfully tuned them out as they went about reading their Bibles.

And so, in a cold, underground room at the school, we find our troublemaker. He was shirtless, bound at the wrists, and hanging from a hook in the ceiling. He was also covered in sweat from the strain on his arms, as the Inquisitor alternated between asking him questions and beating him with a thick leather strap across the chest and back. After an hour of being beaten for his insolence, a barely audible Jeff—in sheer defiance of this tyranny—rasped, “Cuius regio, eius religio.”

“What did you say?”

Louder this time, “Cuius regio, eius religio!”

With lightning speed, the strap flared across his back again, instantly searing the skin bright red. The guttural scream that erupted briefly from his parched lips was silenced by the mercifully quick loss of consciousness. Jeff was brought round abruptly, thanks to a bucket of ice-cold water thrown into his face, followed by a few slaps to the cheeks to clear the cobwebs.

“I would advise you to start cooperating and stop with the smart comments.”

Jeff ignored the warning and continued, “Here’s something for you to think about, Inquisitor. What if one of your ancestors was put up for adoption. Said relative was then summarily adopted by a Jewish family. Did your cousin have a choice in the brand of religious indoctrination they were brought up in—or did you, for that matter? If they hadn’t been adopted, they most likely would have received the exact same religious conditioning you got as a child. So, would you discriminate against this person just for being Jewish, even though they are a part of your family?”

Dick didn’t know what to say, as it was too much to take in all at once. His defense mechanisms were firing in all different directions, and his religious blinders were going into overload as he tried to process the information. Jeff thought to himself, the wheel is turning, but the hamster is dead.

“Here’s something else for you to think about. The Israelites from the supposed ten northern tribes who were deported by their Assyrian conquerors, where do you suppose they ended up?”

The Inquisitor began to fidget and walk around the room as the discomfort of the conflicting thoughts racing through his head made him unable to stand still. His pulse quickened and he answered venomously, “The Jews got what they deserved, they broke their covenant with God, and he cursed them.”

“Whatever! Jesus Christ, what is it with fundamentalists and your revenge fantasies? Jews were punished for betraying their own messiah; AIDS is a curse on homosexuals; tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes are God’s punishment on wicked sinners. So, what’s your excuse?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dick roared, as he rounded on Jeff, nostrils flaring as he leaned in threateningly just an inch away from his face.

“Well, you’re a morally uptight, God-fearing, fundamentalist Christian . . . what’s your excuse? God obviously cursed you, too; you drooling, knuckle-dragging moron—”

Jeff never even saw the fist coming. All he sensed was his head snapping back, as the stars swirled and danced around his eyes. After his brain stopped spinning, he slowly raised his head and looked the Inquisitor defiantly in the eye and said, “Shall I continue?”

“Please, by all means.”

“Noting that Assyria was in modern-day Iraq, over the centuries the exiles would have assimilated into the surrounding culture, into what ultimately became a Muslim society. It is statistically probable that at least one of the most ardent Muslim extremists is a descendant of one of the Israelites. Now, doesn’t the cosmic irony of that, of family religion, make you want to laugh your ass off?”

“It seems you rather enjoy making fun of the faithful, Mr. Spicoli. Perhaps I’ll leave you here to hang around awhile, and let you think about your life choices.” The Inquisitor roared with laughter at his own joke, as he left the room. Jeff stared at the retreating back and winced at the thought of being left strung up . . . for God knew how long.

Chapter 12:

Clearly, there is sanity in numbers. . . . This leaves billions of us believing what no sane person could believe on his own. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions.

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*

In The White House Situation Room . . .

The senior advisers to the president, including all the heads of the armed services—the Joint Chiefs of Staff—were gathering in the Situation Room beneath the White House. After they had all taken their seats the president wasted no time in demanding answers.

“General Rigidson, as the commanding general of the United States Air Force, would you kindly tell me how the hell one of your commanders was able to launch a preemptive attack on his own authority?”

“Uh, well, if you recall, you yourself signed the orders for Attack Plan R, Mr. President. This contingency plan allows a lower-echelon commander to initiate retaliatory strikes in the event of a sneak attack that removed you and your immediate successors from the chain of command.”

“But Washington hasn’t been attacked, General Rigidson, and I am still very much in command. So, would you care to explain how, what’s his name,” the president demanded as he looked at his briefing notes, “how this General Rimmer was able to launch his fighters without proper orders from the National Command Authority?”

“Well, uh, Mr. President, it would seem General Rimmer exceeded his, uh, authority.”

“Yes, General Rigidson, I should say he *has* exceeded his authority. The question of the hour is what are you doing about it?”

“Well, sir, uh, our initial attempt to recall the wing failed. Under the procedures of Attack Plan R, the wing is instructed to use their CRM discriminators to block any unauthorized transmissions. Our supercomputers have only just managed to crack the code by randomly trying every three-digit prefix. The radio prefix is, uh, OPE. This seems to be a variation on a theme that General Rimmer kept rambling on about in the communiqué to his commanding officer in the 25th Air Force, who passed it up the chain of command to me. Rimmer kept mentioning something about purity of education and peace on Earth. This, uh, seems to be the basis of the CRM code prefix, sir.”

“Thank you for the update, General Rigidson. What’s your next step?”

“Well, sir, uh, I just need to give the recall code to our boys, and they will terminate their attack and return to base. Would you like me to proceed with issuing the recall, Mr. President?”

“Just a second, General Rigidson, let me think about the implications of this for a moment,” President Muffer said. He then turned and had an intense, whispered conversation with the White House Chief of Staff.

After a few minutes with the seconds ticking by, and the window for recalling the wing getting smaller and smaller, the general interrupted. “President Muffer, uh, do you want me to call the fighters back?” As the president seemed to be lost in thought and didn’t reply, General Rigidson asked again, “Mr. President?”

“No, I don’t think I will call them back,” the president said, ominously. “I mean, what is the Christian States Prime Deacon going to do, retaliate and bomb us back? That wouldn’t be very Christian of him, now would it? Besides, when they seceded, most of their military infrastructure reverted to the United States, so they are limited to defensive capabilities only. What’s the worst they can do, but send out hordes of missionaries to annoy us at dinner, incessantly ringing our doorbells and asking us if we’ve found Jesus? No, this might just do some good. Let’s see how this plays out.”

“Uh, yes, Mr. President.”

“In the meantime, we better get the ambassador from the Christian States in here to brief him.”

“Mr. President, you want to bring their ambassador into the Situation Room?” a visibly agitated General Rigidson asked.

“Yes, I want their ambassador in here right away. Protocol dictates that we at least warn them. Get on it,” the president commanded.

“Right away, Mr. President,” an aide replied, while reaching for the phone in front of him to summon the Christian ambassador.

“General Rigidson, while we wait for the ambassador to arrive, would you please give us your professional assessment and walk us through the tactical situation. What level of fallout can we expect if the planes succeed in their mission?”

The general reached under the table, lifted his briefcase up and set it in front of him. He dialed in the combination to unlock the case, searched through the secure files until he found the folder labeled, *Target Numbers of Mega-Deprogrammed*, and withdrew it from the case. General Rigidson chewed on his bottom lip while he flipped through the pages to review the information, then after a few seconds he looked up and replied, “Uh, well, sir, according to the payload information we have on the weapons General Rimmer deployed, we are looking at roughly one hundred sixteen million people affected, sir. This number mostly accounts for people in cities and suburban areas, with a small percentage of those in rural areas likely to escape the blast radius.”

“General, who compiled this report?”

The general flipped to the front page, skimmed it briefly and stated, “Uh, well, it says here a Dr. Mannlove, Mr. President.”

“Mannlove? Mannlove? Oh right, now I remember hearing the name. He is some sort of weapons expert. Somebody find him and get him in here as fast as possible to consult with us.”

A short while later, both the C.S. ambassador and Dr. Mannlove were escorted into the room by a stern-faced Marine. The ambassador, dressed in a navy-blue, double-breasted suit and red silk tie with a small golden cross as his tie pin, walked straight to President Muffer and extended his hand in greeting.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President. It is a pleasure to see you again, sir. What seems to be the problem?” the ambassador asked.

“Ambassador, we have a situation that I need to brief you on. First, let me introduce the other gentleman.” The president turned to the second man, this one dressed right out of the pages of a men’s fashion magazine. Dr. Mannlove was wearing a custom-tailored, two-thousand-dollar, grey Armani suit with a small pink triangle pinned to the lapel. The stylish look was completed with an avant-garde black turtleneck sweater, expensive burgundy Oxford brogues, and a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses that accented his slicked-back hair.

“You must be Dr. Dieter Mannlove, welcome to the White House. I am glad you could make it on such short notice,” the president said warmly, shaking the doctor’s hand. “Please, Dr. Mannlove, let me introduce you to the ambassador for the Christian States of America, Mr. Sal F’Abusi.”

Dr. Mannlove could not help it when a brief flash of mirth danced across his eyes at the mention of the ambassador’s name. But, due to the gravity of being hastily called to the White House Situation Room, Dr. Mannlove sensed now was not the time to make any humorous remarks. “A pleasure, Ambassador F’Abusi,” the doctor said with a distinct German accent, extending his hand in greeting.

The ambassador accepted the offered palm—diplomatic protocol dictated that he not refuse—with thinly veiled displeasure and hesitation, as if the doctor’s unmistakable sexual orientation was contagious. “Likewise, Doctor Mannlove,” he responded with a very insincere tone and quickly released the unexpectedly firm grasp. “Mr. President, how may I help you?” the ambassador said, turning away as fast as he could from the man who made him so uncomfortable.

“Gentlemen, please have a seat and I will get right to the point. Ambassador F’Abusi, I regret to inform you that earlier today one of our generals, on his own authority, issued orders to scramble his pilots and sent them to bomb the territory of the Christian States.”

“What?” the ambassador burst out, forgetting his decorum in the presence of President Muffer. “Why am I just being notified of this now, why didn’t you call me right away?”

“Ambassador, I must say that we had hoped to resolve the situation quickly and quietly, without needing to trouble you. However, as events have unfolded, it seems we are unable to recall the pilots and now find ourselves in the sticky situation of having to notify your government of the impending attacks,” the president lied.

“Mr. President, I must formally protest at the delay. I should have been notified immediately. My office will be lodging an official reprimand with your Secretary of State—”

The president was quick to cut him off. “Ambassador, your objection is noted, but now is not the time for empty threats and diplomatic temper tantrums. We can deal with the fallout—excuse me, a poor choice of words—we can deal with the repercussions later. Right now, our immediate concerns are the fighters and

their payloads, which is why I have asked Dr. Mannlove to join us. Doctor, would you please fill us in on what you know about the weapons these planes have been armed with and what we can expect to happen?"

"Of course, Mr. President. It is my distinct honor to offer my assistance. From what I understand from General Rigidson," a knowing glance passed casually between the doctor and the general as he looked up at his subject and smiled, "these planes were armed with a payload of T-bombs, and each bomb carries multiple independent warheads. The warheads have been fused for an airburst at altitude, to maximize the spread of the biochemical agent over a larger area, with each capable of blanketing an area the size of a small city. Each plane can easily cover a single, major metropolitan area, and several smaller regional cities with one payload."

"My God!" the ambassador said, somewhat ironically.

"I fear, Ambassador F'Abusi, that your God will no longer be of much concern to your citizens if these planes succeed in their mission," the doctor stated indifferently.

"What do you mean? What do these T-bombs do, precisely?"

"These thinking bombs are, essentially, weapons of anti-mass dementia. The initial detonation releases an electromagnetic pulse of energy that wipes clean the neural pathways of a target population indoctrinated by years of theological conditioning, resetting the brain. It is the human equivalent of rebooting an electronic device, erasing all the user customization and returning it to the factory settings. The secondary airburst is a biochemical agent that permanently blocks the serotonin receptors on the synapses in the frontal, temporal, and parietal lobes, known as the God spots of the brain.

"This two-pronged punch liberates minds warped by absurd faith-based preconceptions in the targeted populations, allowing new ideas to enter their brains without stubborn resistance. Once these people are able to think clearly, they will then be able to automatically disregard primitive superstition in favor of real scientific evidence. In essence, this bomb reprograms the human brain by acting as an S.S.R.I., or a selective serotonin religious inhibitor," Doctor Mannlove stated. "This technology is the result of years of observations and experiments in neurotheology. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging to isolate the parts of the brain most susceptible to religious indoctrination, scientists were able to develop the exact combination of electrochemical solutions to counter this unfortunate affliction."

While Dr. Mannlove explained the more detailed scientific technicalities, the Chief of Staff sitting next to General Rimmer leaned over and whispered, "Say, that's a funny accent, where's this guy from?"

"Dr. Mannlove is the foremost German biochemical weapons expert."

"German, huh? What's he doing here in the States?"

"We got him in a trade with the Germans. We gave them David Hasselhoff and they sent us Dr. Mannlove."

The Chief of Staff suppressed a small grunt of appreciation and said, "Sounds like a fair deal. Mannlove, that's an intriguing name."

"Yes, he changed it when he emigrated from Germany."

"What was it before?"

"Mannliebe," the general answered succinctly before turning back to the main conversation.

As Dr. Mannlove finished his explanation the ambassador exclaimed, "Holy shit!"

"Holy would hardly be the correct term, in this case, Ambassador F'Abusi," Dr. Mannlove said in amused irony.

"So, you're telling me that the pious citizens of the Christian States of America will no longer worship the one, true God, as is divinely commanded, but they will be like the liberal filth of the Ungodly States we left behind?" the ambassador blurted out in terror.

"Pretty much," the doctor replied. "It's kind of cool, don't you think?"

"No, I absolutely don't think it's 'kind of cool,' doctor; and I resent your obvious disdain for our ways."

"Oh, you mean like the way your people resent and disdain the ways of people like me, or the freedoms of the people of the United States?"

"I, uh . . . well, yes, actually. Why shouldn't we disdain your evil ways? While you choose to revel in sin, we choose to live in a state of God's law and teachings."

"More like a state of denial and oblivion," Dr. Mannlove fired back.

The president interrupted the two men trading barbs and declared, "That's enough, gentlemen. You can't quarrel in here. This is the Situation Room! I think it's time we got the Prime Deacon of the Christian States on the hotline and bring him up to speed. Get Damien Ball on the phone," now, he didn't have to add.

When an aide had reached the leader of the Christian States, he informed the president that the Prime Deacon was waiting on the line. The president turned to Ambassador F'Abusi and said, "Tell him where you are and give him a heads-up that we have a situation, but leave the details to me."

The men in the room each picked up a phone and listened in as the ambassador began. "Prime Deacon Ball, this is Ambassador F'Abusi in Washington.— Yes, sir, may God go with you, too, sir. Prime Deacon, I wanted to let you know I am here at the White House Situation Room with President Muffer and his senior advisers.— Yes, sir.— But, sir, I need to inform you that a situation has developed that requires your immediate attention.— Yes, sir, I will let the president explain it to you. Hold on, sir." Turning to President Muffer the ambassador said, "I've done as you asked. But, be warned, Mr. President, I think he is in a state of religious ecstasy."

"Hello . . . hello, Damien . . . Damien, would you turn the Christian music down?— That's better, now I can hear you, Damien.— What's that, I should call you Bubba?— Oh, Bubba-Z. I get it, Bubba-Z Ball, very clever.— Yes, of course, you can call me Merkin. Now then, Bubba, we've always talked about the possibility of something going wrong between our two countries.— Well, now, what happened is, one of our base commanders, he had a sort of . . . well . . . he sort of went a little funny in the head and he went and did a silly thing.— Well, I'll tell you what he did; he ordered his planes to attack your country.— Let me finish, Bubba.— Well listen, how do you think I feel about it? Can you imagine how I feel about it, Bubba? I am just calling up to tell you something terrible has happened.— It's a friendly call; of course, it's a friendly call. Listen, if it wasn't friendly you probably wouldn't have even gotten a call.— Listen, the planes will not reach their targets for at least another hour.— I am positive, Bubba. Listen, I have been over this with your ambassador.— Listen, we are trying to recall the wing, but they have encrypted their radios and we are trying to get through to them.— We will get them back, Bubba, don't you worry; we have the codes and we just need to get them transmitted to the planes. We just wanted to bring you up to speed.— I'm sorry too, Bubba. I'm very sorry. All right.— Yes, he's right here, hang on. He wants to talk to you," the president said, turning the conversation back over to the ambassador.

"Yes, sir, this is Ambassador F'Abusi again.— Yes, sir.— I see.— Oh my God!— Yes, sir. God bless you, too, sir, goodbye."

"What is it?" the president asked warily.

"The fools, the mad fools."

"What's happened?"

"The Judgment Day device!"

"What is that?"

"The Judgment Day device is a failsafe plan that was designed to automatically trigger itself in the event of an attack by your Godless forces. The plan calls for the release of an arsenal of nuclear family bombs within the United States in order to preserve the word of God. Essentially, it's the reverse of your T-bomb. There is an entire army of Christian sleeper agents embedded throughout communities in the United States. Christian missionaries are posing as ordinary, everyday American citizens, but primed and armed with Bibles to go forth and multiply the Christian faith. All they need to be activated is a tragedy such as this, and they will automatically come out of hiding."

"General Rigidson, did you know about this?" the president demanded to know.

"Uh, yes, Mr. President, our intelligence services have been aware of this plot; in fact, our analysts have code-named their plan 'Infest Destiny.' However, if I may humbly suggest, Mr. President, that this might be a good opportunity for us to put all our military resources into a full-blown, pre-emptive strike and catch the Christians while they are down on their knees praying. We could put an end to the secession and reunify the country under a secular government, with, uh, one swift move."

"What about their plot to convert our citizens, General?"

"Mr. President, I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than ten to twenty million of our people, tops, would be converted by their nuclear family bombs. Uh, depending on the breaks."

"Mr. President," interjected Dr. Mannlove, "I would not rule out the option of using the same biochemical religion inhibitors on our own people in order to convert them back and put a stop to this insanity."

"You want me to use a weapon of anti-mass dementia on the American public, Dr. Mannlove?"

"Regrettably, yes. But, it is a sacrifice required for the future of the human race."

“I must say, Dr. Mannlove, you have an astonishingly horrible idea,” Ambassador F’Abusi stated in righteous indignation.

“Perhaps we should look at this from a military perspective,” General Rigidson advised the president. “Suppose this is a pretext for the Christian States to launch a sneak attack. I think it would be extremely naïve of us to imagine that these new developments would cause any change in Christian expansionist policy. We must increasingly be on the alert to prevent them from breeding more prodigiously and knocking us out through superior numbers. Mr. President, we must not allow a secular gap!”

Chapter 13:

But each sect claims to have reason on its side. It will therefore be force which will judge, while awaiting the time when reason will penetrate a sufficient number of heads to disarm force.

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*

Judgment Day . . .

“Flight, this is Lead,” Major Dong radioed, “commence final preparations for bombing run. Weapons hot, you are free to engage.” The jets broke formation as each flew off to home in on their individual targets. Major Dong climbed to bombing altitude after flying low to avoid detection by radar, his jet engines screaming as they accelerated his plane towards the city coming up over the horizon.

Some while later, having no idea how long he’d been hanging there, Jeff heard the Inquisitor coming back towards the room. Between the acute pain in his shoulders and the dehydration, he wasn’t even sure what year it was after losing consciousness so many times. His eyes came into focus, and to his horror, he saw the Inquisitor pushing a cart in his direction; the screeching of a stuck wheel only added to the terror. He spotted the stun gun placed atop the cart and tried in vain to scream, but his throat was too dry and all that escaped was a pitiful wail.

“Please . . . no,” he begged, his voice hollow and quaking. His body began to shake with abject fear. A single tear, all the moisture left in his ravished body, slid slowly from his right eye and hung on the edge of his cheek before falling to the floor.

The Inquisitor watched it fall all the way down, with a self-righteous, satisfied smirk on his twisted face. “I am afraid it is too late to beg for my forgiveness. The time has come to begin your reeducation, to drive the Devil from your body, so that you can rejoin the flock.”

He picked up the stun gun and stepped towards the wretched soul he was trying to save, paused and asked, “Tell me, my son, what is the Trinity?” and touched it to the side of Jeff’s torso.

Screaming, writhing in pain and panting for breath, Jeff was unable to answer. The Inquisitor zapped him again with a brief jolt of electricity, this time on his back. “I asked you a question. What is the Trinity?”

After his heart slowed and he was able to catch his breath, he finally wheezed, “A hoax, you sanctimonious prick!”

“*Wrong answer!*” the Inquisitor bellowed, as he touched the stun gun to Jeff’s chest, causing him to pass out again. Enraged that his subject had taken the easy way out, the Inquisitor grabbed a bucket of cold water and hurled it at Jeff. The chill instantly jerked him into unwanted consciousness. “Wake up, you Devil! Let’s try this again—what is the Trinity?”

Jeff eyed the stun gun held menacingly close to his face, as pain fired all through his body. He didn’t want to feel that shock again, no, not ever again. Jeff could smell the sweat on the Inquisitor, who was ever so close, and Jeff saw that he was breathing heavily from the enjoyment. Okay, he thought to himself, that was a really stupid move. Rule number one, don’t dick with Dick. Sarcasm is neither appreciated, nor understood, by those of lesser intelligence. Rule number two, to thine own self be true. Screw that, try again. Self-preservation—yes, a much better idea. “The Trinity is a doctrine of God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Looking visibly defeated, like a kid who’s had his favorite toy taken away, the Inquisitor slowly lowered his hand. “You are starting to see the light, the light of God that lives and manifests in all things. I am pleased, my brother in Christ.”

Wow, this guy is really blinded by faith, Jeff thought. It never occurred to him that I’m just telling him what he wants to hear. Dick’s so blinded by his faith, in the absolute truth of his convictions, that he can’t even comprehend how people could fail to see the wisdom in loving God with all their heart, body, mind, and soul. Everyone, naturally, must feel the way he does.

Then, as suddenly as the smile appeared, the light in his eyes went out and was replaced by a dark, sinister void that made Jeff’s blood run cold. Oh . . . shit! Jeff dry-heaved, his stomach-wrenching in pain as it tried to force up fluids that were no longer there. The High Inquisitor, Righteous Dick, took a step forward and touched the stun gun once again to Jeff’s chest. He was enjoying this now, this was no longer about extracting evil; this was pure, unadulterated fun. Just like having a pet to torture when he was a kid.

From the depths of his soul, Jeff finally found the reserves of remaining strength to let loose a blood-curdling scream, which helped him stay conscious this time. Whimpering like a toddler, cringing at the slightest movement, dreading the moment he knew would come again as the Inquisitor slowly, tauntingly walked around him in circles. Stopping directly behind Jeff, the stun gun found its mark on his back. Excruciating pain shot through his body, his back muscles instantly contracted under the electrical barrage, forcing his body to twist and contort while his hands hung from the ceiling.

“Tell me, what number makes up the Trinity?”

Gasping, “Three.”

“No, I don’t think so,” he said and touched the stun gun to Jeff’s back again. “I believe there are four.”

Jeff’s mind unhinged. Exhausted, thirsty, disoriented, in agonizing pain, and at the mercy of a madman’s capricious nature, his sanity started to unravel. Any will he had left to resist suddenly evaporated. He would do or say anything to stop this, to make the Inquisitor happy. It didn’t matter what, or if it was entirely nonsensical, he would say whatever this man wanted to hear. Red is blue, up is down, talk radio is a wonderful medium, whatever. I’ll tell you anything you want to know, just please, God, make it stop.

“Right, four; I meant to say four, sir. I’m sorry, thank you for showing me the error of my ways. Four, yes, the answer is four.”

“Are you sure?”

Oh shit squared times infinity. His mind reeling, summoning blood to his brain, commanding his neurons to fire, what in the name of all that is holy is the right answer? “I beg his Righteousness, please, tell me the answer. Show this poor, wayward soul the way to truth and salvation.”

“Yes, the answer is four. You are wise to open your heart and let the Holy Spirit enter and fill you with divine inspiration.”

Oh, thank God, Jeff thought. Then, just as he thought the worst was over and he was on the downward slope, the Inquisitor touched the stun gun to his back one more time.

“Jesus Effin Christ! What the hell did you do that for?”

Circling back around the front, Dick slapped him hard across the face. “Thou shalt *not* take the Lord’s name in vain! Again, what number makes up the Trinity?”

Panting, and with the last ounce of strength and defiance left in his ravaged body, he screamed one last time, “There . . . is . . . *NO* . . . Trinity . . .”

The bomb detonated and a blinding spectrum of light flashed, its photons washing everything they touched with an irradiating glory. A rainbow of illumination spread throughout the land, and comprehension dawned on the faces of the newly enlightened in a new era of freedom and tolerance. People learned to live secular lives, share ideas openly, and leave others to live their own lives in peace and harmony . . . until they found some other judgmental reason to divide them.

But, that’s another story.

Afterword

While this book is primarily aimed at evangelical fundamentalism, I do cite many examples that span the length of Vatican history. For roughly one thousand years, from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the Reformation, the Vatican dominated the political, social, and obviously religious affairs of Western Europe and so they rightly and deservedly get caught in the crosshairs, as well. However, to demonstrate my willingness to shed the light of truth onto urban myths regarding religion, I have chosen not to include some misleading references; references that I found to be perpetuating exactly the kind of nonsense this book is about. And, so as not to spread further misinformation by including these references, simply because it was a negative story for slamming religion, I did not use them. For example, I did not jump on the bandwagon of Vatican complicity in the Jewish Holocaust of Nazi Germany. I found this to be a misrepresentation of the truth and a deliberate smear tactic. And, even though there is a long Christian history of official anti-Semitic policies which contributed to this barbaric atrocity, there is plenty of evidence to support the vindication of the Vatican and Pope Pius XII, and their efforts to shelter and save many unfortunate souls.

Also, I did not reference the 2003 media hype surrounding the release of the 1962 Vatican document, *Crimen Sollicitationis*, as evidence in the Vatican-sanctioned cover-up of sexual abuse scandals. I was satisfied with the Vatican's explanation (in this case) and from reading the text, that this document was not drafted with the intent portrayed in the media, but that its intent was to protect the victim's privacy. Therefore, I made the decision not to use this story as further evidence of Church complicity when my research demonstrated the opposite. I feel to have done otherwise would make me just as guilty of spewing the same falsehoods, half-truths, and propaganda as the zealous proponents of religion I castigate in this book. Besides, Vatican history gives so many other real and documented issues to make use of that it would be pointless to use questionable material. Issues like the Edgardo Mortara case, which interested persons can read about and decide for themselves just how low the Vatican can sink. I don't need to indict the Vatican, as I prefer to let the truth of their abuses and mistakes prove my points, which is ironic given the Church's proclamation of its own God-given infallibility.

However, my refusal to include specific issues doesn't absolve the Church of their complicity in deliberately covering up the numerous and widespread cases of child molestation and obstruction of justice within its ranks. This was blatantly demonstrated in 2011 by the release of a 1997 Vatican [letter](#) to Irish bishops warning them not to report all the cases of sexual abuse to secular authorities. Despite repeated claims by the Vatican that they have never issued orders to their clergy to withhold evidence or suspicions of abuse from the local police, this letter categorically contradicts their ass-covering lies. It does, however, clearly demonstrate their self-appointed right to internally investigate all sexual abuse allegations and dole out a punitive slap on the wrist, far from the eyes of civilian blind justice. But, it would seem they never really handled these situations, as all they did in some cases was merely shuffle the suspected priests around from parish to parish, rather than dealing with them decisively.

Since this book was originally published in March 2013, scandals have continued to erupt around the globe. One month before the first edition was published, Pope Benedict chose to retire for 'health reasons,' after being hounded for years about his complicity in the cover-ups. A brief sampling of other major events which have occurred in the intervening six years include: *Spotlight* winning the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2015 for detailing the years of rampant abuse and systemic cover-up in Boston, and Cardinal Law, the former Archbishop of Boston, dying in 2017 in Rome under the protection of the Vatican after avoiding justice for his role in the scandal; thirty-three Chilean bishops offered to resign in 2018; Cardinals Pell of Australia and Barbarin of France being convicted in 2019 for abuse and failing to report, respectively; and in May 2019, Pope Francis [issued](#) a *motu proprio* (an official act), *Vos estis lux mundi* (You are the light of the world), which requires Church employees to report any suspicions of sexual impropriety to their superiors. Notably, this order did not make any mention of reporting to secular law enforcement authorities, which earned the Vatican widespread condemnation for perpetuating more of the same.

Of course, had the Church—from the beginning—employed a policy of open, transparent, and unbiased civilian investigations, instead of the decades or even centuries of cover-ups, the sheer scope of the problem would never have been allowed to get so huge in the first place. The Church would have been forced to acknowledge the widespread and systemic problems. That problem being, as a mental health counselor trained for dealing with Catholic priests and former monk, Richard Sipe, explained in the 2012 HBO

documentary, *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God*, that: “The system of the Catholic clergy . . . selects, cultivates, protects, defends, and produces sexual abusers.” Also in the documentary, Vatican correspondent, Marco Politi, mentioned this is not a new problem for the Church: ‘It is the century-old history of the Catholic Church. We have documents from councils [[Synod of Elvira](#), circa 305] in Spain in the fourth century after Christ, in which there is written something about sex abuse with children. So, it is thousand seven hundred years that the Church is dealing about this.’

Then again, they would never have allowed such impudent outside interference to happen anyway, given that the Vatican hierarchy considers themselves to be above the laws of men. Ironically, given the colossal magnitude of the Vatican’s negligence in protecting additional children from predator priests, and their complicity in the cover-up, the Church has since forfeited a large chunk of the moral authority they claimed for themselves. The princes of the Vatican are now seen by many in the world at large, not as beacons of morality, but as morally bankrupt.

Given that the Church claims itself and its popes are infallible, I guess we can’t fault their self-serving hypocrisy, because to admit one fault would cause the whole house of cards to start collapsing in on its own flimsy doctrinal foundations. However, if the Vatican truly wishes to regain some of the respect it used to demand through fear and ignorance, then perhaps they should show some contrition and beg forgiveness for their glaringly obvious fallibilities. The Vatican seems incensed by the cheekiness of the media, civilian institutions, and the people they can no longer silence with threats of hellfire or excommunication for daring to criticize or challenge them in this era of global information. While this tactic works well to intimidate their own faithful into submission, the fact that it doesn’t work on others only seems to further annoy them.

The Vatican could start to rectify past errors by: disavowing the doctrine of papal infallibility and their insistence on adhering to this ideology which many bishops objected to in the first place; admitting they are not the sole guardians of truth and moral authority; and setting aside the divisive legend of the primacy of Rome. These tokens of good faith might just help to heal the thousand-year schism with the Eastern Orthodox Church. They have admitted they were wrong before, such as with Galileo and the Earth-centric universe, so why not do it again and start cleaning house? Then, maybe, people might grant them some tiny measure of credibility. But for now, they remain locked in a dogmatic time-warp, stuck in the Middle Ages and stubbornly clinging to their own delusions of grandeur, as dwindling numbers of their own congregation are able to rationalize taking them seriously.

I would also like to know why most spiritual advisers from the monotheistic traditions are not talking about topics such as the Documentary Hypothesis, the Enuma Elish or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and how they cast doubt upon and indeed shed light on the origins of biblical stories, rather than hiding the existence of such topics through omission. It would certainly go a long way to contribute to a better understanding of the moral of the story, rather than persisting in their claims to the literal truth of the story itself. It is not as if these issues are unknown to the clergy, as amply demonstrated by the results of the 2010 Tufts University survey, *Preachers who are not Believers*, which [stated](#): ‘It is interesting that all our pastors report the same pattern of response among their fellow students: some were fascinated, but others angrily rejected what their professors tried to teach them. Whatever their initial response to these unsettling revelations, the cat was out of the bag and both liberals and literals discerned the need to conceal their knowledge about the history of Christianity from their congregations.’ Such is the hypocrisy and deception inherent in faith-based systems when reason so impudently intrudes.

Finally, I would like to quote Professor John J. Collins from *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*:

The portrayal of the Bible as a source of infallible truth does not arise from a reading of the Bible itself, but is a monstrous imposition upon it.

One of the most persistent themes of the Hebrew Bible is the critique of idolatry. . . . Perhaps the greatest irony in the history of the Bible is that it itself has so often been treated as an idol and venerated with a reverential attitude while its message is ignored. Biblical figures from Abraham to Job do not hesitate to argue with the Almighty. The least that might be expected of readers of the Bible is that they bring the same critical spirit to bear on the biblical text.

I hope the message people take away from this book, and I thank you reader for taking the time to indulge my scribbling, is that you should never let anyone tell you what to believe—least of all me. Question, be skeptical, read for yourself, and make up your own mind from the evidence presented. I suggest starting with some of the books mentioned in these pages. Do not take solely on faith what you’ve been told to believe by those in authority over you since childhood. I fear that until people of faith realize,

and can honestly acknowledge, that the beliefs taught to them in childhood bias their thinking, their attitudes, and hinder their ability to participate in a truly sincere and candid discussion, we as a society will be unable to hold a rational debate with them on religion.

This is a sad state of affairs for the twenty-first century, because we, as intelligent, thinking adults, should be able to critically examine and discuss all topics with candor and logic, and not be dismissed by the mindless, offhand retort, “you are wrong, [simply] because it contradicts my beliefs.” Beliefs based purely on faith and taught to an impressionable child. Beliefs of a totally arbitrary nature, given that whatever god the parents taught their children to believe in (Hindu, animistic, monotheistic, etc.) is the only basis for their faith in that particular deity or set of beliefs.

The humanist ideals encapsulated within the three major monotheistic religions are individual social responsibility, charity, mercy, and love for fellow humankind; forget all the rest. The accumulated white noise of religious dogma obscures these noble concepts, and only leads to narrow-minded divisiveness and intolerance. We all have the potential to be moral, upstanding citizens without sacrificing our intellect to the superstitions of ancient desert nomads and compromising our ability to be free-thinking members of a modern, enlightened society. Therefore, my parting words to you would be: think for yourself.

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About the Author:

I have journeyed through the entire spectrum of belief from moderate Christian, to born-again, back to moderate, to agnostic and finally, over the past 10 years, to confirmed atheist. Raised in a moderate Christian family with regular church attendance as a child, indoctrinated in a Baptist school for two years, I started the journey to atheism in university after being removed from the weekly immersion of church and exposed to new ideas and experiences. I prefer to think of myself as a humorous humanist, rather than a raging atheist. I am also a certified scuba instructor and a passionate marine environmentalist.

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